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EPA plan for Superfund site involves loss of trees

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By S.I. ROSENBAUM
Journal Staff Writer

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NORTH PROVIDENCE -- Residents of Centredale Manor and Brook Village might be losing a leafy view, but the mayor's office and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hope they'll be gaining a safer environment.

Next month, the EPA will start another construction project at the town's Superfund site, where the Woonasquatucket River flows through the grounds of Centredale Manor and Brook Village.

It's a place where the river -- long known to be polluted with dioxins and other toxic chemicals -- has slowed to a marshy trickle, said Frank Bursie, the town's Special Projects Manager.

"We need to clean out that area ... so the river will flow the way it did years back, " he said. "With all the vegetation that has grown there, and all the sedimentation and sand, it has slowed to a crawl, an almost nonexistent flow."

Since water can't move through the river quickly, rainwater washing in off Smith Street has no place to go, Bursie explained. It pools, and when it finally seeps away, it carries polluted soil with it downstream.

"The flow of water over the years has been scouring out that area and transporting contaminated sediments downstream into the pond," said Ted Bzenas, EPA's on-scene coordinator for the project. The remedy, he said, is to re-excavate the old tailrace -- the artificial riverbed created for the use of the mills that eventually polluted the river.

The EPA plans to dig out the tailrace and pave it with a "geotextile membrane" -- essentially a waterproof liner -- and a layer of crushed rock.

Providing the water with a quick, sealed-off route through the contaminated site will prevent it from washing dioxins downstream, Bzenas said.

The riverbank will be capped with clean soil, and seeded, he said, "so it will grow back into more of a wetland than a swamp."

The project will be paid for by "responsible parties," companies that contributed to the pollution and are under a court consent order to pay for cleanup efforts.

The downside: the project will not only weed out the vegetation clogging the tailrace, but also several of the trees along the river which provide residents of the two high-rises their picturesque view.

"This will be a significant alteration of what the residents ... currently see from their homes," said Mayor A. Ralph Mollis. "Our understanding is there will be the removal of a significant number of trees. That alone is going to provide a significant change in the whole landscape."

He said that he has dealt repeatedly with complaints from residents about mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant water of the choked tailrace. This project will address those concerns, he said, but he also expects the project to be controversial because of the tree loss.

"When you look out your window and see trees, and now you're seeing the post office park ... it will be a change," he said.

But before any of that happens, the mayor and representatives from the EPA will meet with residents on Oct. 7.

Residents will have a chance to voice concerns and questions, and to have their suggestions taken into consideration, Mollis said.

"Our goal is to reduce drastic change as much as possible, while at the same time letting the EPA do their job," he said.

Bazenas said he will try to preserve the view as the project goes forward. "I'm certain some trees will be lost," he said, "but not all of them. And we'll work with the mayor's office to do the best we can to assure that the trees that can be preserved will be preserved, and it will protect the view from both sides of the tailrace."

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