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Celona seeks Superfund relief

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NORTH PROVIDENCE -- State Sen. John Celona is taking his fight to seek relief for neighbors of the Superfund site on the Woonasquatucket River to Washington.

Celona is trying to rally the state's federal lawmakers to support legislation that would give property tax breaks for homeowners near any polluted site with the federal Superfund designation.

While the federal government provides clean-up financing and assistance, it does not offer any help to residents harmed by the inevitable drop in property values that comes with living next to a Superfund site.

"Many of those people are unable to sell their homes, refinance their mortgages or get home equity loans," Celona said. "I do not believe that it is fair for innocent property owners who just happen to abut a Superfund site."

The Environmental Protection Agency designated an area around Centredale Manor a Superfund site early last year after tests revealed high levels of dioxin and other contaminants along the river.

Celona tried to push legislation through the General Assembly to establish a state program to provide financial relief for abutters of the North Providence site. The site is located in a densely developed residential area. The bill didn't go anywhere.

Celona had previously appealed to the federal government for help but was told that the law creating the Superfund did not extend to relief for homeowners. He had begun working on the issue with the Sen. John Chafee when the pro-environment lawmaker died.

Celona saw the window of opportunity open recently when the Democrats seized control of the Senate upon Sen. James Jeffords's defection from the Republican Party. The Vermont senator was subsequently named chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, which oversees Superfund issues. Lincoln Chafee, who won his late father's senate seat, sits on the committee.

"With the change in the Senate, I am trying to resurrect this thing again," Celona said.

Celona said he has learned that residents abutting Superfund sites in other parts of the country have similar concerns to those in North Providence. He said he recently received a call from an Indiana reporter

"It's not something that has happened only in Rhode Island. It's a national issue," Celona said. "It is time for the federal government to step up to the plate to help those residents."

Celona said he has written letters seeking to enlist the support of Senators Chafee and John Reed and U.S. Representatives Patrick Kennedy and James Langevin.

Celona's proposed legislation would require the federal government to appoint tax assessors to quantify any change in value of properties within 200 feet of Superfund sites. If the values dropped, their municipalities would be required to lower tax bills a corresponding amount.

The municipalities would be reimbursed by the Superfund, Celona said. Ultimately, the polluters, who are pursued to pay clean-up costs, would also be asked to cover the cost of the abatements.

"The tax relief should begin the day the site is declared a Superfund site and end the day the designation is lifted," Celona said.

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