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Epsom

Engineers outline options for Suncook Residents ask how work will be paid for

By MEG HECKMAN
Monitor staff

May 30, 2008 - 12:00 am

In the two years since a flood-swollen Suncook River changed course it's been the subject of several studies, but the people living along its banks say the time for research is done. They want action. Otherwise, they fear, the now-unstable Suncook will wash away their homes.

"Help can't come soon enough," said Susan Intinarelli, whose Pembroke home sits near the river's new path. She and her neighbors are contending with silt, erosion and the knowledge that, if another flood occurs, their properties may be among the first to go.

Intinarelli was one of 40 people who assembled at Epsom Central School on Wednesday night to hear an engineer's proposal to stabilize the river. The plans, drawn up by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, would slow erosion and give the river better access to its floodplain, reducing the threat of damaging floods. But the work will cost \$1.8 million to \$2.1 million, and no one knows who will pay.

"When are we going to get action? That's a good question," said Epsom Selectman Keith Cota. "It's not like we're some rich community that can put away \$10 million in a rainy day fund and pull it out."

Last year, Epsom chipped in with the state, the Friends of the Suncook River and other agencies to hire VHB. The firm's job was to develop ways to mitigate damage done on Mothers Day in 2006, when flood waters plowed through a glacial ledge, causing the Suncook to seek a shorter, straighter route.

Although the course change, called an avulsion, occurred in Epsom, its effects are felt from Chichester to where the Suncook meets the Merrimack River. At Wednesday's meeting, residents and engineers offered a catalog of the avulsion's long-term effects:

Erosion threatens the Route 4 bridge. Guests at campgrounds along the river find the water too fast for casual canoeing. And, as one Allenstown man said, sediment has made "beaches where there were never beaches before."

"It's a different river, it's a different recreational environment," said Peter Walker, VHB's director of environmental services.

In addition to the stabilization plan, which would involve rock structures, dredging and work on the new channel, Walker offered three other alternatives:

- Do nothing, which he said would allow erosion to keep creeping northward and risk another avulsion downstream.
- Stabilize the river without touching the new channel, which would cost between \$500,000 and \$750,000 less than the recommended plan.
- Return the Suncook to its original path, a plan engineers say is risky, expensive and "not prudent." The work would cost \$4 million to \$5.5 million, carry long-term upkeep costs and wouldn't provide additional flood protection to the towns.

No matter the plan, getting it done comes down to money. Those at Wednesday's meeting were dubious that their towns could pay. Both Allenstown and Epsom are on default budgets, and voters are loath to approve any new spending at all. In Epsom, for instance, a request for \$1,000 to maintain the town website was defeated last spring.

State environmental officials and the Epsom selectmen hope to work with nearby towns to apply for grants and seek other sources of money, but even state lawmakers worry the job won't be easy.

"I think you guys have done one heck of a job," said Sen. Jack Barnes, whose district includes Allenstown. "But where does the town of Allenstown go? What can we do for them?"

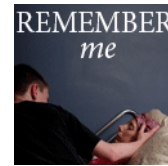
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