

Epsom

Officials try new course on river

State money could aid Suncook repair

By [Matthew Spolar](#) / [Monitor staff](#)

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Four years after a major flood pushed the Suncook River into a new channel that runs through an Epsom sandpit, the Department of Environmental Services has submitted its first request for money from the state's capital projects budget to deal with an erosion problem that could eventually threaten the stability of the Route 4 bridge.

On Monday, selectmen and town employees from Epsom, Allenstown and Pembroke held a joint meeting to discuss a lack of progress after the sudden change of course that occurred during the 2006 Mother's Day flood. The new path through the sandpit causes sediment to wash up along properties downstream.

"I think at the end of the meeting everybody found that we're kind of limited on this," Allenstown Town Administrator Paul Apple said. "In reality, the towns don't own the river - the state does. It's really integral that the state become involved with this."

For the past two years, Steve Landry, the state's Merrimack watershed supervisor, spearheaded applications for federal disaster mitigation grants to stabilize the Suncook River avulsion. Both times, most recently in April, the state was told their applications had been denied.

"It's a tough pot of money to compete for when you're going up against Hurricane Katrinas and horrible flooding in the Mississippi River basin," Landry said.

This week, however, Landry informed town officials that his department is requesting just over \$1 million from the state's capital appropriations budget to address the problem. The State House hearings, in which legislators decide which projects to fund through capital appropriations, begin Monday morning.

Allenstown fire Chief Shaun Mulholland said the request, which was made with the support of the governor's office, is a "good sign," though whether it will be approved is uncertain.

"The state has never had money set aside before," he said. "It was never even discussed before."

Landry said that \$850,000 of the request would be used for construction efforts that would shore up the river banks near the sandpit in Epsom. The goal is to stop sediment from being swept into the river and taken downstream, where it settles, raises the riverbed and causes more floods.

"You've got to cut off the source first," Landry said.

Additionally, the construction would attempt to stop the erosion that is progressing upstream from the sandpit site, inching closer to the Route 4 bridge. Any danger to the bridge could still be a decade away, Landry said, but the goal is to stop the erosion before it threatens the bridge's stability.

The rest of the money, about \$185,000, would complement a \$450,000 federal grant that Epsom is set to receive in July for a study that would chart the future evolution of the river in its post-2006 channel, Landry said. The study would propose zoning ordinances for areas along the river, where towns could choose to limit or ban new development to ensure the structures would not be affected by the river's migration.

Landry said the state does not intend to put the river back into its original channel. He said his office's research did not reveal a single instance across the country where a river as big as the Suncook had been successfully moved back into a channel.

However, to property owners along the river, Landry said the proposed construction would hopefully end the sediment and increased flooding problems they have suffered since the course change. If the state money is approved, Landry said he wasn't sure when the work would be completed, but he said he's sure that it would "not be another four years."

Epsom Selectwoman Joanne Randall, whose board sent a letter to the state earlier this year expressing frustration with the lack of financial support to help with the river, said she was glad to hear about the capital appropriation request.

"I hope it goes in, and I hope it passes because that's the only way it's going to get paid for," she said.