

Questions linger on long-term health of Mill Creek

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

Seven months after 3 million gallons of sewage and wastewater poured into Arnold's Mill Creek, residents still have questions about the health of their creek and want to know whether there will be any long-term fixes.

Officials at the county Department of Public Works say they are doing their best to understand Mill Creek's woes, but add that solid answers may be a long time coming.

The county will hold a meeting at Anne Arundel Community College on Aug. 9 in hopes of better explaining what's going on with the troubled creek.

But Ron Bowen, director of public works, acknowledges that he and his department have a long way to go in restoring public confidence.

"People's patience is wearing thin," Mr. Bowen said.

The most recent problems with Mill Creek date back to Dec. 17, when a sewer pipe along College Parkway near the Mill Creek Pumping Station collapsed, creating a large sinkhole. Sand and dirt fell into the pipe and clogged the pumping station.

Ultimately, 3 million gallons of sewage and wastewater and 1,200 cubic yards of sand wound up nearby wetlands and the creek.

Work crews stopped the flow and re-lined 2,000 feet of sewer pipe. About 500 cubic yards of the sand was removed from the wetlands after the spill, leaving 700 cubic yards behind.

Since then, the creek has had problems with bacteria levels, causing health officials to close it to swimming, wading and waterskiing for several weeks this summer. It's not clear yet whether the bacteria problems are related to December's sewage spill.

And even before the recent woes, Mill Creek's problems go back for decades. Archives at The Capital document scores of sewage spills and odor problems at the pumping station going back 30 years.

All this has Mill Creek homeowners worried not only about the quality of their creek, but about the perception of the creek's problems.

Waterfront homeowner Juliet Page said at a recent gathering of neighbors that others think that "Mill Creek is the county's cesspool."

Several neighbors nodded their heads in agreement.

To get word out about what's going on with the creek, Ms. Page has been staying in close touch with the county and posting data at www.savethecreek.org.

The last time county officials met with neighbors, in January, most went home disappointed.

When they gather again next month at the second Mill Creek meeting, officials may not have any better answers.

Mr. Bowen said no decisions will be made about any projects to improve the creek until a full year of studies have been completed.

The study includes:

- Water samples both upstream and downstream of the spill site, testing for dissolved oxygen, bacteria, ammonia, chlorophyll, phosphorus, nitrogen and suspended solids, among other measurements.
- Mapping the watersheds and identifying septic systems and other potential sources of contamination.
- Core samples to see what is in the bottom of the creek.
- Bathymetry, which analyzes changes in the elevation of the creek bottom.

Though the county is only about halfway through its monitoring study, Mr. Bowen said some of the preliminary results have indicated that Mill Creek has more problems than just the pumping station and faulty pipe.

For starters, bacteria and nutrient problems have been identified upstream of where the spill occurred, indicating that polluted stormwater runoff or failing septic systems could be contaminating the creek.

The number of septic systems - more than 300, mostly behind Anne Arundel Community College - and vast stretches of pavement in the highly-developed area also could be contributing to the creek's problems, Mr. Bowen said. How much so remains the question.

Paul Spadaro, who heads the Magothy River Association, was not surprised to hear that.

"It's too easy to point a finger and say it's all from this one overflow," he said. "It further strengthens my belief that we've overdeveloped in this area."

When it comes to sediment filling in the creek bottom, public works officials do have an estimate of how much has been caused by the spill from their bathymetry studies.

From 2001, when a channel in the creek was last dredged, to this year, there are 1,350 cubic yards more of material on the bottom. Public works officials figured 700 of that might have come from December's spill.

Most of that is likely sand, though some of it could be the solid parts of sewage. The 3 million gallons of sewage contained about 8 cubic yards (216 cubic feet) of solid material, Mr. Bowen said.

"The rest is the natural (occurrence) of what comes through the stream reaches," he said.

No plan yet

Mr. Bowen said his department is waiting to see what else the study reveals before deciding whether anything more can be done to help the creek.

Nothing can be done, he said, about the liquid parts of sewage that spilled. Tidal action likely has long since flushed out the liquid sewage and wastewater.

The main thing that can be done would be to dredge the creek to remove the sediment and sewage solids lodged in the bottom.

It could be a challenge, however, to get state and federal approval to extend the dredging area beyond the channel that previously was dredged.

Greg Page, Juliet Page's husband, said he worries that the study and dredging application will take so long that the county will lose the narrow wintertime window of opportunity when dredging is allowed.

"They can't possibly get it done in time," he said.