

Cecilton Water Supply Strong Option for Earleville Wells Polluted by US Army Corps

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By [Nancy Schwerzler](#)

State and federal officials were enthusiastic at a meeting Wednesday about the prospects of running a water pipeline from the town of Cecilton to several communities along Pond Neck Road in Earleville, where drinking water wells have been polluted by the nearby US Army Corps of Engineers dumpsite.

Cecilton Mayor Joseph Zang said he and members of the Town Council liked the idea as well, since it could help reduce water costs for town residents. And for Earleville residents affected by the pollution of their homes' water wells by the federal dumpsite, Cecilton water would give them clean, clear water that was rated "best tasting water" in a 2008 competitive municipal water taste-test.

Mayor Zang and the town's planner/engineer met Wednesday with representatives of the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Maryland Environmental Service, and the Maryland Port Administration at a small roundtable session at Cecilton's town hall. (Cecil Times was the only media representative present at the meeting.)

The issue stems from a recent independent federal study that found the Corps' Chesapeake Bay shipping channel dredge spoil dumpsite on Pond Neck Road in Earleville was responsible for polluting many nearby residents' drinking water wells. The Corps, and the Maryland Port Administration (MPA), want to resume dumping at the Earleville site that was suspended 20 years ago due to state environmental agencies' concerns about contamination of local residents' water wells.

The MPA recently told local residents and Cecil County officials the state agency is willing to "contribute" toward fixing the problems with local water wells, but has not said how much the agency is willing to pay toward the potentially multi-million dollar costs of providing safe, clean water to local residents.

And still unclear is who, or which agency, would pay the costs of extending water lines from the town of Cecilton to the Earleville communities—some 7 miles away—and how much it might cost for local homes to hook into such a system and how much it might cost in maintenance, operating, and usage fees for the Earleville residents.

Extending a water pipeline from the Cecilton town limits to the affected communities has been estimated at costs from \$2 million to \$3 million, according to private estimates and MES reviews.

Duane Wilding, senior engineer with the water and wastewater group of the Maryland Environmental Service, said at the Cecilton meeting there have been some in-house "preliminary" cost estimates of how much it would cost to run additional local waterlines into individual homes in the affected communities— but he declined to share in public the cost figures. Those figures do not include the costs of running a main water pipeline out from the town of Cecilton.

Cecilton town water supplies appear to be a cost-effective, and locally popular, option rather than previous suggestions of drilling very deep on-site wells in the most severely polluted communities in the West View Shores, Bay View Estates, Sunset Pointe and Pond Neck Road areas.

Cecilton has excess water supply, due to upgrades at the town water plant that were required by various regulatory mandates, and if the town were to sell water at a "bulk rate" to users outside town limits, it would mean fees paid by non-town residents would help lower costs of water service to town residents. And for possible new Earleville customers, the town's relatively low water rates would mean cheaper services than many private water suppliers.

Cecilton's water system is rated for providing 386,000 gallons of water per day, although currently the town system holds permits to provide just 98,000 gallons. There is significant additional capacity available, and state regulatory permits could readily be revised.

Mayor Zang noted at the meeting that the town's water system, based upon two deep water wells, currently only needs to run a few hours a day to supply town residents' needs. But expanding pumping to serve the Earleville homes would not over-tax the town's capacity even if additional pumping hours were needed, he added.

In regulatory terms, to extend Cecilton town water to the polluted Earleville water customers, there would have to be revisions to Cecil County's master water and sewer plan, which lays out which areas are allowed to have such services. An option discussed at the Cecilton meeting was to make sure the water pipeline was constructed so that no intermediate cut-ins would be possible. Only the communities affected by the Corps dumpsite's pollution of water well aquifers could tap into the line, so no additional growth or development would be serviced along the roadway from the town to Earleville.

Cecil County Executive Tari Moore and a majority of the County Council have supported finding a solution to the Earleville well water pollution problems, so a revision to the county water plan to accommodate the Earleville dumpsite area would likely be supported.

During the discussion in Cecilton, Zang said the town would not want any responsibility for operating expanded water services beyond the town line, with some other entity in charge of servicing and maintaining water lines and a possible water holding tank in the local Earleville communities. The Town would prefer selling water, at a "bulk rate," from a meter at the town line, he said.

Cecil County Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) has said that the county will not step in to operate a local water services operation, in "the middle of nowhere," as he described Earleville. So that would mean another entity, such as a private water service operator, would have to get involved at the customer service level.

The next steps in the process will be for an engineering study to evaluate the logistics and costs of running a water pipeline out from the town line to Earleville, as well as preparing potential requests for regulatory OKs including state permits to expand the approved capacity of the Cecilton town water system, and approvals under the county's water master plan.