FRIDAY, MAY 29 1998

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Canal cleanup finalized

$7.3 million citizen plan sets standard

By Nancy Bazilchuk
Free Press Staff Writer

Vermont's first federal hazardous waste site, which for almost two decades blocked a proposed Burlington highway and caused worry about Lake Champlain pollution, stepped into environmental history Wednesday.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency announced a $7.3 million cleanup agreement for the Pine Street Barge Canal Superfund site, an agreement that will set national precedents.

It was crafted by a first-in-the-nation council of citizens, lake advocates, public officials and businesses who took on the task after Vermonters vehemently rejected the EPA's 1992 plan to build a huge $50 million landfill on the site.

EPA Regional Administrator John DeVillars, on hand Wednesday for the announcement, said he was using the Barge Canal approach elsewhere in New England, particularly at the troubled Otis Air Force Base hazardous waste site on Cape Cod.

And in Wednesday's agreement, the companies who by law must pay for cleanup have said they will do more than the legal requirements of Superfund, the federal program that governs how the site must be handled.

The companies, led by Green Mountain Power Corp., will pay an additional $3 million for cleanup of other pollution hot spots in Burlington, on top of the $4.3 million cleanup plan. The additional money is intended in part to make up for pollution that oozed out of the Barge Canal into the lake in decades past.

The proposal will be subject to public review until July 8, after which the EPA will issue a formal decision. Cleanup could begin as early as next summer.

The Barge Canal contains enough coal-tar contaminated soil to fill a football field more than 100 feet deep, the legacy of a plant that turned coal to gas for heating and lighting for more than 60 years. Coal-tar residues, some of which are cancer-causing, were dumped or spilled in the wetlands behind the facility while it was operating. The plant closed in 1966.

Wednesday's announcement was good news for Burlington residents who for years have watched and wondered how the Barge Canal nightmare would be resolved. Residents were worried that pollutants from the contaminated soils might be wafting into the air in nearby neighborhoods. Others were concerned that people might be swimming or fishing in the canal, which contains contaminated sediments although the canal water itself tests clean.

Jim Garrison has firsthand experience of how toxic the sediments in the bottom of the canal can be: While a teen-ager, the 35-year-old Burlington resident accidentally fell into the canal. His back erupted in boils that took several weeks to go away. While Garrison's experience was bad, state and federal officials agree the Barge Canal does not pose a human health risk.

"It's fantastic they're going to deal with this," Garrison said. "I see people still fishing down there."

And Clarence Meunier, a city alderman when Burlington first planned to build the Southern Connector highway through the site more than two decades ago, said he was glad to see progress on the cleanup.

"This is great," Meunier said. "Someone has needed to take the bull by the horns for years."

Meunier said he was frustrated, however, that the Connector would not follow its original path through the Barge Canal. Burlington Mayor Peter Clavelle said Wednesday he did not expect the road's route will ever go through the site.

As warbling vireos chirped in the background, the Pine Street Barge Canal Coordinating Council, the group that met 100 times in five years to develop the cleanup plan, signed its agreement at the canal site and for-

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mally submitted it to DeVillars. The plan calls for:

■ Leaving in place the 600,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials found in sediments and soils.

■ Placing a clean sand and silt cap on contaminated sediments under the Barge Canal's waters and designing stormwater runoff controls to prevent the cap from being disturbed. The underwater cover will be 2 to 3 feet thick when laid down, but will eventually compress to a foot thick.

■ Covering a contaminated wetland with a 1½-foot-thick sand and silt cap and replanting it with wetland plants.

■ Continual testing of Lake Champlain to make sure the Barge Canal doesn't leak contamination into the lake. Tests indicate contamination is effectively locked in the peat soils underneath most of the site.

■ A $3 million package of additional projects, including a $1.3 million cleanup of Englesby Brook, just south of the Barge Canal, and $1 million to study Burlington Harbor, all designed to improve the lake's water quality in recognition of the fact that contaminants will remain on the site.

Lori Fisher, executive director of the Lake Champlain Committee, the advocacy group on the coordinating council, applauded the process and said she hoped other states could benefit from the council's success.

"It's a credit to all the people on the coordinating council that we are able to deliver a plan that is protective of the environment, a sound remedy for the site, and with $3 million set aside for projects to improve Lake Champlain," she said.

The Barge Canal had been leaking oily wastes into Lake Champlain off and on since at least 1928, but no one realized how badly the area was polluted until the Transportation Agency proposed building the Southern Connector across the 70-acre site. It was then that the extent of the contamination became clear: In places, the pool of poisoned peat soils is more than 40 feet thick.

But early efforts to devise a solution after the site was named to the federal Superfund list in 1981 were plagued by botched scientific studies and federal and state bungling. When the EPA finally withdrew its $50 million landfill plan in May 1993, more than $5 million had been spent on the failed effort.

Clavelle said Wednesday he remembered being stunned by the EPA's 1992 proposal.

"I learned a new word — sarcophagus ... they wanted to build a tomb on the site," Clavelle recalled, noting that the landfill would have been the largest structure in Burlington. "Vermonters said no way, and to our amazement, they listened."

The outcry reached EPA national headquarters in Washington, D.C., and EPA administrator Carol Browner came to Vermont to tell angry residents she was willing to try a different approach to the cleanup.

"When this proposal first came out, it looked like we were going to build the last Great Pyramid in Burlington," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who with the rest of the Vermont congressional delegation, Gov. Howard Dean and the Legislature opposed the EPA proposal. "But the EPA and Carol Browner listened to the people of this city. We Vermonters are environmentalists ... we want to be reasonable, but let us design a system that will work."

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What's next

■ **INFORMATIONAL MEETING:** 7 p.m., June 4 at Contois Auditorium in Burlington City Hall.

■ **FORMAL HEARING:** 7 p.m., June 24 at Contois Auditorium in Burlington City Hall.

■ **TO COMMENT AND FOR MORE INFO:** The federal Environmental Protection Agency will accept comments on the proposed plan from June 5 to July 8. Comments should be sent to Karen Lumino, USEPA, JFK Federal Building/HBT, Boston, Mass. 02203; phone (617) 573-9662; email lumino.karen@epamail.epa.gov.

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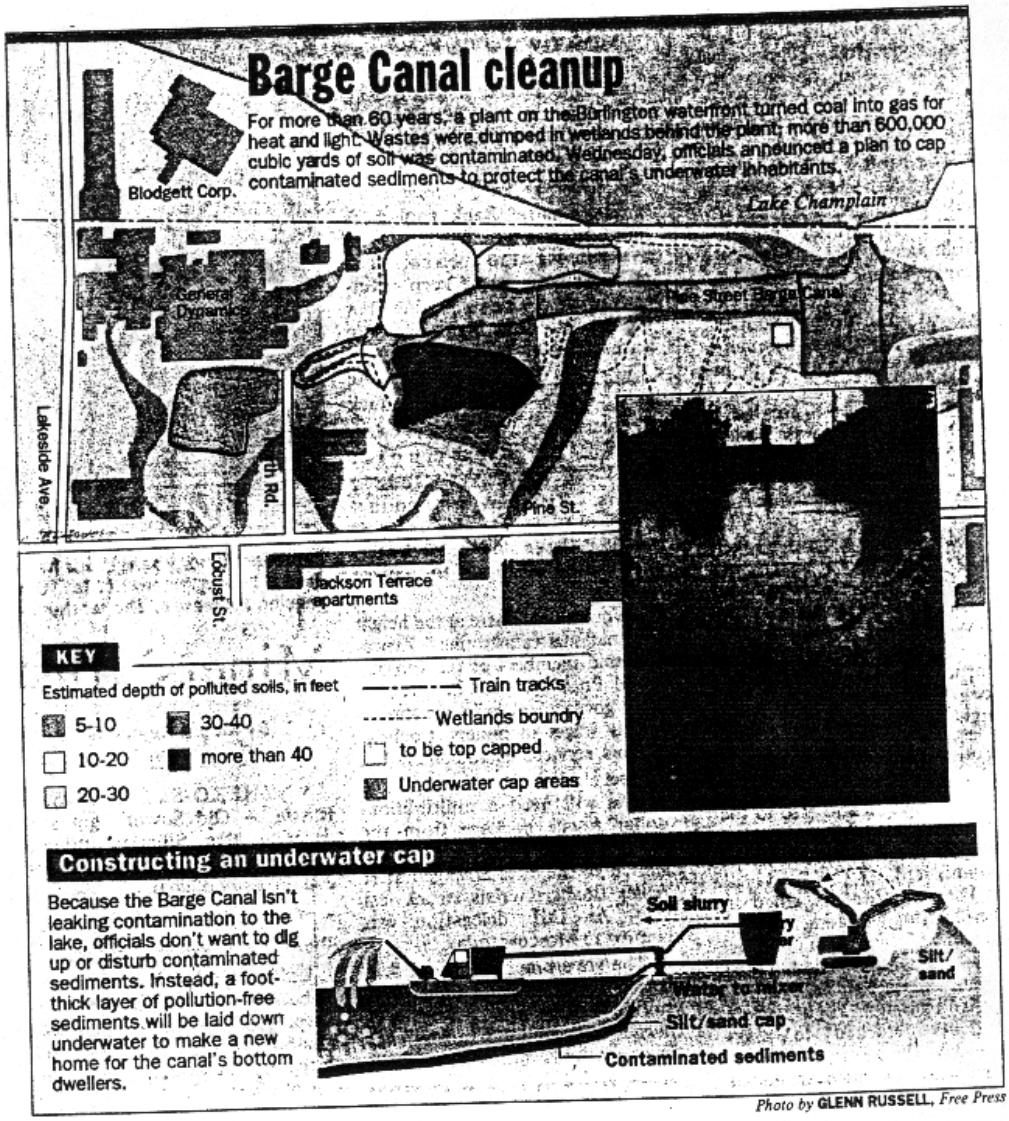
Barge Canal cleanup

For more than 60 years, a plant on the Burlington waterfront turned coal into gas for heat and light. Wastes were dumped in wetlands behind the plant; more than 600,000 cubic yards of soil was contaminated. Wednesday, officials announced a plan to cap contaminated sediments to protect the canal's underwater inhabitants.



Because the Barge Canal isn't leaking contamination to the lake, officials don't want to dig up or disturb contaminated sediments. Instead, a foot-thick layer of pollution-free sediments will be laid down underwater to make a new home for the canal's bottom dwellers.

Photo by GLENN RUSSELL, *Free Press*

Rutland Daily Herald • Thursday, May 28, 1998

Barge Canal Plan Hailed

By FREDERICK BEVER
Vermont Press Bureau

BURLINGTON — A $7.2 million deal to rehabilitate the contaminated Pine Street Barge Canal was hailed Wednesday as a sign of the Environmental Protection Agency's new attitude about enforcing the Superfund toxic waste site law.

The EPA had proposed six years ago that the coal tar contaminating the marsh be excavated and entombed in a 14-acre structure on the site, at a cost of $50 million. "It looked like we were trying to build the last of the great pyramids," recalled Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, one of several speakers at a signing ceremony held on Wednesday at the site.

The EPA backed away from the controversial plan after a community outcry and began working with the companies responsible for the pollution, local and state officials, and community activists.

"When it was just the EPA doing the job, we weren't doing it right," said John DeVillars, the EPA's regional administrator. "We learned something, finally, not just in Vermont, but across the country."

After the 1992 fiasco, the EPA convened a coordinating council of officials from responsible parties such as Green Mountain Power Corp., EPA, the state, environmental groups and the city of Burlington in an attempt to find consensus.

The plan that finally emerged included placement of an underwater

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Canal

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cap of silt and sand over the most polluted parts of the canal and nearby wetlands, construction of stormwater control structures, enactment of land use restrictions to control the site's use, and ongoing monitoring for pollution leaks.

The cost of those actions, which could be completed by the end of the year 2000, was estimated at $4.3 million. To sweeten the deal, GMP and other responsible parties agreed to spend another $3 million on related projects.

Those include $1.3 million to improve water quality in nearby Englesby Creek, a $1 million contribution to the University of Vermont's water research center, a $250,000 engineering study of ways to reuse the site, and $100,000 to build interpretive trails.

GMP Vice President Stephen Terry said the special projects package was meant to compensate for the century-long history of pollution that had severely limited the site's use. Plus, he said, the measure promoted goodwill among the negotiators.

"It's mitigation for past damage," Terry said. "And it was a very important part of the agreement that helped the parties come together and not spend the next 15 years in court."

GMP is on the book for most of the costs, because it owned most of the site during much of its operating history. From 1895 to 1966, a plant at the site converted coal and oil into gas used for lighting — the toxic byproduct, coal tar, was dumped in the canal.

Although the site poses a relatively small danger to human beings, aquatic invertebrae, fish and other organisms have been exposed to contaminants. The new remedy would seal off most of the contaminated areas from aquatic life, and also prevent the contaminants from leaching into Lake Champlain.

In addition to GMP, there are a dozen other organizations that have had a close enough association with the site for the EPA to include them on its list of "potentially responsible parties," including the state, the city of Burlington and current property owner General Dynamics.

GMP officials would not say how much the company's portion of the costs would be. GMP President Chris Dutton did say, however, that the company would ask the state to allow some of the costs to be recovered through electricity rates.

The EPA also plans to bill the responsible parties for some of its expenditures on the site since it was first included on the Superfund list in 1983. GMP and the EPA have yet to agree on how to apportion the $11 million of previous costs.

Many of the speakers on Wednesday, including Leahy and Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., praised the EPA for backing away from heavy-handed regulation and implementing a process that truly involved the community.

About the new plan, Leahy said, "This is a case where they can say 'we're the federal government and we're here to help you' and really mean it."

DeVillars said the Burlington experience had provided a model for resolving disputes over cleanup of other Superfund sites in the country, including the General electric site in Pittsfield, Mass., and the 14,000 acre Otis site in Cape Cod.

"One of the big challenges is trying to change the culture from within the EPA," DeVillars said in an interview. The Burlington project, he said, presented a first step toward trying to institutionalize a process that is more responsive to community needs.

"When we get the sweet taste if a success like this (EPA workers involved with the project) become the most effective internal ambassadors."

The EPA will not issue final approval of the plan until after a 30-day public comment period.

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PM-VT--Barge Canal,760<
Agreement reached on Barge Canal hazardous waste cleanup<
By DAVID GRAM Associated Press Writer

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) Five years after public outcry killed a plan to bury the Barge Canal hazardous waste site under a landfill, officials have announced agreement on what they said was a better plan for less than one-fifth the cost.

Ten years from now, the 70-acre tract on Lake Champlain just south of downtown Burlington is envisioned to have new development and open spaces, complete with trails and signs depicting the area's history.

Federal, state and local officials gathered near the Barge Canal on Wednesday to announce they had reached agreement on a plan to clean up the first site in Vermont designated under the federal Superfund law.

John DeVillars, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in Boston, called the agreement the first of its kind in the country, in that it resulted from broad-based community participation, rather than being imposed by the EPA.

``The council's groundbreaking work will serve as a blueprint for other communities (that) are struggling with Superfund cleanup decisions." DeVillars said.

The Barge Canal became polluted when a plant that extracted gas for lighting and cooking from coal dumped its residues in the canal and the wetlands surrounding it.

Under the Superfund law, efforts are made to find the companies and individuals responsible for polluting a site and have them chip in to play for cleaning it up.

DeVillars and other officials estimated Barge Canal cleanup consisting mainly of covering the most hazardous spots with sand and-or silt would cost $4.3 million under the new plan. About $11 million has been spent so far, much of it on legal fees and engineering studies.

In addition, potentially responsible parties, including General Dynamics, which owns some of the land, and Green Mountain Power Corp., which owned part of the land when coal tar was deposited there, have agreed to chip in voluntary contributions totaling $3 million.

The money will be used to restore the polluted Englesby Brook, which is near the Barge Canal, create walking paths with signs in the Barge Canal site itself and to study water quality in Lake Champlain near the site. The brook cleanup should allow

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A Good Solution

The perfect often becomes the enemy of the good, but perhaps nowhere so pointedly as in the area of environmental protection. Burlington's Pine Street Barge Canal represents an instructive example of how government zeal on behalf of an idealistic solution can actually work against lessening pollution.

The Pine Street site stands as the unfortunate result of many decades of abuse, as a plant transformed coal and oil into gas, and dumped coal tar into the canal. This posed a threat to aquatic life, especially the diversity of species in nearby Lake Champlain.

No one disagrees that the site needed to be cleaned up. But the real question was "How?"

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When the Environmental Protection Agency proposed a $50 million project in 1992, the community howled in protest. The proposal, which would have dug out the coal tar and constructed a 14-acre covering for the polluted area, was widely viewed as an example of government overkill.

To the EPA's credit, it realized that its initial approach was not going to fly. That's when government decided it would be best to work with the community rather than in spite of its wishes.

The happy result was last week's $7.3 million agreement to bring the canal site a bit more closely back to life. The deal would cap the most badly polluted areas, control storm runoff and monitor the area for leaks.

At the agreement's signing ceremony, government officials conceded that their earlier overenthusiasm was in part responsible for the delay in righting environmental wrongs. EPA Regional Administrator John DeVillars noted that involving the community in an effort to find the best solution marked the turning point of the project.

"When it was just the EPA doing the job, we weren't doing it right," he said. "We learned something, finally, not just in Vermont, but across the country."

Let's hope this understanding leads to a quicker resolution of the impasse over the many other polluted sites that still seep poisons into the nation's landscape.

Those environmentalists who still refuse to concede even an inch of ground to the enemy may well be disappointed by the Pine Street Barge Canal deal. But if this episode has taught anything, it is that an uncompromising, confrontational approach actually costs more time and money (all those lawyers' fees) than entering into negotiations with the polluters.

At last the Burlington waterfront now has a plan in place to guard against further environmental damage. It may not be the perfect result, but it is a good one.