

Newport Restoration Advisory Board
Project Committee Report
April 16, 2003

This past week the headlines proclaimed that a team from Great Lakes Dredge Inc., in Illinois, finished there dredging in Boston Harbor and arrived at India Point in Providence. After many years of negotiations and impact studies, the actual dredging of the Providence River is about to begin.

In a recent article Senator Jack Reed reported that he had requested \$1.5 million for environmental assessments to select a permanent offshore disposal site.

The U.S.A.C.E. has spent more than \$8 million on these special assessments for dredging, more than any other dredging projects. Sites to monitor the work will be set up and a special Web site developed to keep the public informed.

If this dredging is successful and does not harm the Bay, possible other dredging projects will be seen in many of the surrounding communities.

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Narragansett Bay: Reduce, Restore Dredge and Decide

by Senator Jack Reed

Narragansett Bay has often been called the crown jewel of Rhode Island's natural environment and for centuries it has been the lifeblood of our economy. Now, the time has come for Rhode Islanders to make crucial decisions about our use of the Bay. While we continue to reduce our environmental impact on the Bay and work to restore degraded natural habitats, I believe we must confront -- and resolve -- major outstanding issues related to marine transportation and economic development.

Reducing our impact on the Bay

The most immediate environmental threat to the health of the Bay is the annual discharge of about 2.2 billion gallons of untreated sewage into waterways in the upper bay area after heavy rainfalls. Our aging combined sanitary and stormwater sewage system simply cannot handle severe wet-weather events. In 1998, combined sewer overflows led to the closure of 14 beaches and thousands of acres of shellfishing beds in Narragansett Bay due to dangerously high bacteria levels.

Although the primary responsibility for these efforts lies with local communities and organization, we should secure federal funding to support the Narragansett Bay Commission's plan to put an end to combined sewer overflows by collecting millions of gallons of sewage during heavy rain events and then pumping it to treatment plants after a storm has passed.

Restoring natural habitat

After 300 years of industrial development, much of the damage that has been done cannot correct itself naturally. We must take an aggressive, proactive approach to restore the salt marshes, eelgrass beds, fish runs, and other coastal habitat degraded over the years by the pressures of human development.

Federal resources can also help. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working closely with the Coastal Resources Management Council and several towns to bring back eelgrass habitat along the South Coast and restore fish passages in coastal waters. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration recently awarded a grant to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, CRMC, and Save the Bay to create an information system to help make decisions about habitat restoration throughout Rhode Island.

Dredging the Providence River channel

The Providence River channel leading to the Port of Providence -- the entry point for 98% of Rhode Island's fuel supply -- has not been dredged in over 25 years. Portions of the channel are so shallow that large vessels frequently must offload their cargo onto unmanned barges in the middle of the Bay.

We need to maintain the Providence River channel if we want to avoid disasters like the 1996 North Cape oil spill, and we were reminded again over the past few months that access to the Port of Providence is also necessary to help protect our citizens from the threat of sharp increases in the price of home heating oil and gasoline.

Yet, for more than a decade, we have seen the dredging of the Providence River become a never-ending saga of study upon study. One of the primary obstacles is the question of where to dispose of the sediment generated by the project. Rhode Island is the only state in southern New England without a permanently designated disposal site for sediment from navigational dredging projects. To help rectify this situation, I have requested \$1.5 million for environmental assessments by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to select a permanent offshore disposal site for Rhode Island.

Deciding about port development

After more than a year spent on a stakeholders process to address concerns about development of a port facility at Quonset Point-Davisville, no definitive decision on the future of the Port was made. With international trade on the East Coast likely to double over the next decade, the potential for Quonset Point demands a decision. The next immediate step is to build on the stakeholders process by conducting a careful and disinterested analysis of the major environmental impacts that have been identified. If such impacts cannot be successfully addressed, then our energies should be directed to other uses for Quonset Point. But, if these impacts are not insurmountable, then we should go forward, knowing that any final approval will only come after meeting the exacting standards of our Federal and state environmental laws.

We live in extraordinary economic times, in which we are blessed with the public and private resources to pursue a meaningful coastal development program and invest in effective environmental protection. We owe it to ourselves and succeeding generations of Rhode Islanders to face the difficult questions about our use of the Bay and to answer them without further delay. At the same time, if we continue to reduce our impact on the Bay and work to restore degraded habitat, the return on our investment will be substantial, and Narragansett Bay will continue to be the gem of the Ocean State.