

# LOCAL NEWS

## Company set to start dredging shipping channel

The dredging of the Providence River has been studied and researched extensively in order to prevent any harm coming to Narragansett Bay.

**BY PETER B. LORD**  
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Barges, tugs and scows belonging to one of the world's largest dredging companies sailed into Narragansett Bay yesterday and prepared to begin dredging the Providence River shipping channel for the first time in more than three decades.

The long-delayed, \$43-million project has been the center of controversy for years, and even after all the final approvals were granted, the start-up is two weeks behind schedule because of bad weather.

The economic value of the project has been subject to long and con-

tentious debate. Dredging has been justified more on predictions about how much worse conditions would get at the Port of Providence if it isn't done rather than any immediate benefits.

One thing is clear: Never before has so much scrutiny, research and debate been focused on preventing a single project from harming the health of Narragansett Bay.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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**EDWARD O'DONNELL,**

project supervisor for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

has spent more than \$8 million on environmental impact assessments for the dredging, more than for any other similar project in New England. A battery of monitoring programs will be launched once the dredging starts and a Web site will

be set up to keep the public informed.

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O'Donnell, the project supervisor for the Army Corps. "But because this hadn't been done for so long, and we were looking for a suitable new disposal site, it cost a lot more than usual."

**THE TEAM** from Great Lakes Dredge and Drydock Inc., in Illinois, came from Boston Harbor, where it has worked for two years on a harbor dredging project similar to the one planned for Narragansett Bay.

The company is scheduled to start its work off Rumstick Point. It will move to various locations in the river depending on a complex matrix of concerns over the level of contamination in river sediments and the expected movements of marine life migrating through the area.

About 7 miles of channel will be dredged to a width of 600 feet and a depth of 40 feet during the next

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# Dredge

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18 months.

The people who will probably benefit the most from the project are the port terminal operators and marina owners who have seen waters around their piers fill with sediments over the years.

Many are seeking permits so they can hire companies to dredge near their docks, and dispose of the materials, as part of the river dredging project.

No one has gotten a final permit yet, according to O'Donnell. But 10 or 11 projects are under review by the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), he said.

Michael Tikoian, chairman of the council, said the project's start-up is an exciting day for Rhode Island because it will lead to safer navigation in the Bay, safe disposal of contaminated sediments, and a solution for marinas that have been losing slips as their waterway fills in.

The Army Corps of Engineers has said the dredging will reduce fuel prices in Providence by lowering shipping costs. Often barges and tankers off-load fuel onto barges just north of the Newport Bridge for fear of running aground in the silted-in channel.

But the amount of the potential savings has never been documented, though the Army Corps has warned that if the channel continued to fill in, there could come a point when ships and barges couldn't reach Providence.

(Leaders of the marine trade industry and harbor pilots have blamed the North Cape oil spill in 1996 on the lack of dredging, but oil industry officials say that

just wasn't so.

(Critics said that if the channel were deeper, oil companies would use tankers rather than barges, reducing traffic in the Bay. But an oil industry spokesman said that dredging would have nothing to do with whether companies used barges or tankers.)

**THE LAST TIME** the channel was dredged — 32 years ago — the sediments were deposited in the water off Newport, near Breton Reef.

Since then, the channel has filled in so much that the Coast Guard has limited it to one-way traffic. Marinas around the Bay complained that they were losing business because their boat slips were filling in.

In recent years, the public's concerns about protecting the environment have grown and those worries seemed to stall dredging.

Many of the sediments in the upper river are significantly contaminated with heavy metals, dioxins and other toxic materials deposited during Providence's industrial heyday. The big question was, what do you do with contaminated sediments?

Finally, in 1996, the General Assembly passed legislation making the CRMC the lead agency to regulate dredging. Former Gov. Lincoln Almond was committed to dredging, and the state's congressional delegation began sponsoring legislation to conduct studies.

The Army responded with a list of about 160 potential disposal sites around the Bay and along the shoreline. It spent several years whittling the list down to 30.

In 1997, the CRMC weighed in with a report proposing eight locations in the Bay and along South County beaches for disposing of the relatively clean sediments dredged from marinas. Contaminated spoils would be used to fill 15 acres of the Bay south of Fields Point.

Marina owners liked the CRMC plan, but biologists at the state Department of Environmental Management objected, saying that every site proposed by CRMC was important for different species of fish.

In 1998, the Army recommended dredging 4.5 million cubic yards of sediments and burying the polluted sediments in a 40-foot deep pit along the East Providence shoreline. Another 340 acres of Bay bottom off Hog Island would be covered with a 10-foot layer of cleaner sediments.

That plan angered hundreds of fishermen and environmentalists, and just about everyone at East Providence City Hall.

The Army Corps went back to its studies and came out with a plan, three years ago, that addressed many of the earlier complaints.

This time, the polluted sediments — totalling an estimated 1.1 million cubic yards — would be buried directly under the shipping channel.

Instead of depositing cleaner sediments within the Bay, the Army Corps proposed an offshore site, about 10 miles southeast of Point Judith. About 5 million cubic yards of cleaner sediments — including materials excavated to create the cells for the contaminated sediments — would create a 4- to 14-foot-high mound, covering 800 acres, on the bottom of Rhode Island Sound.

Subsequently, the Army Corps scaled back the project by dropping plans to dredge along the East Providence shoreline and India Point Park.

It still plans to offer a relatively small amount of sediments, about 215,000 cubic yards, to be used to cap contaminated ground at Fields Point, where Save the Bay plans to build a new headquarters and education center and Johnson & Wales University is developing a new campus.

O'Donnell said bids on moving dredge materials to Fields Point came in \$300,000 higher than expected, but he expected the state would pay the difference.

**GREAT LAKES** does dredging projects all over the world and got high marks for its work in Boston.

The company excavated ledge rock outcrops at various locations in Boston Harbor and also had to bury contaminated sediments in disposal cells dug in the harbor bottom. The contaminated material was covered with sand excavated from the Cape Cod Canal.

"I thought they did a great job here," said Deborah Hadden, an engineer at Massport, the state agency that runs port services in the harbor. "They had a very complex project to do here on a very tight budget with a lot of people watching to make sure that environmentally it was done well. And they had a lot of complex permits to comply with."

Rhode Island will let the dredge company use the piers at the old Shooters nightclub adjoining India Point Park in Providence, O'Donnell said.

The Army Corps and the dredge company are setting up an office at 39 Pike St.

Great Lakes' long history hasn't been without mishaps. Still under litigation are lawsuits filed when a freight tunnel under the Chicago River and numerous nearby building basements flooded after after the company drove pilings into the river that allegedly weakened the tunnel.

Also still unresolved is a case stemming from an incident 10 years ago when Great Lakes dragged a 500-foot length of dredge pipe through the Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary, leaving a 13-mile scar across the sanctuary's seabed.

O'Donnell said he was unaware of those incidents, but he was convinced the company has a great safety record.

"They are really very safety conscious," he said. "Safety is paramount. We just had a national meeting with them, working with our safety folks."

For more information, go to the Army Corps Web site at: <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil/projects/ri/prp/prvdrv.htm>.