

Allenstown / Pembroke

DES: Use 'science-based treatments'

Bill would reroute the Suncook River

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As a new crop of legislators accuses them of not doing enough to remedy the Suncook River avulsion, state Department of Environmental Services officials are sticking to their plan and hoping the Legislature agrees that theirs is the best course of action.

"We don't want to turn this into some adversarial thing that gets overly political. . . . We're just trying to argue for science-based treatments," Steve Landry, a DES watershed supervisor, said yesterday.

During a 2006 flood, the Suncook River jumped its banks and landed in a new channel, which cuts through a sandpit in Epsom. Erosion upstream from the sandpit has raised concerns about the stability of the Route 4 bridge, while downstream residents in Allenstown and Pembroke have experienced increased flooding because silt has raised the riverbed.

A group of newly elected House Republicans representing the four towns affected by the avulsion are now backing a bill to solve the problem by using up to \$6 million to possibly reroute the river to its original channel or stabilize the sandpit and \$1 million to dredge the sediment downstream.

The bill challenges a plan already put forth by the DES in a capital budget request this year that takes a more moderate approach by spending \$850,000 to construct grade controls that would prevent further erosion near the Route 4 bridge and \$2 million that would match federal grants to continue buying up floodprone homes.

"Once (rivers) have basically decided that they're going to follow a different route or a new route, that's the route they're going to keep going back to," DES Commissioner Tom Burack said yesterday, summing up the agency's scientific analysis of why it is not worth spending millions in an attempt to divert the water's current path.

Rep. Brandon Giuda of Chichester, the bill's primary sponsor, says DES decided years ago that it wouldn't try to move the river and is not willing to listen to other opinions.

Giuda is scheduled to meet today with the leadership of the Republican-controlled House to discuss supporting the bill.

"Very respectfully, you have a government agency that has made up its mind and it's going to do everything it can to justify its inaction," Giuda said yesterday.

Landry said DES's response has been limited by funding, noting that every year the agency has sought federal grant money to address the river problem.

"There's an unfortunate perception out there, perhaps, that the state hasn't been doing anything for four years, and quite the contrary is true," Burack said.

The most significant result of DES's efforts since the avulsion is a study of the river completed in 2008 by outside firm Vanesse Hangen Brustlin. Peter Walker, VHB's project manager, said moving the river, while not impossible based on the preliminary study, would be "extremely difficult" and "not definitely feasible."

"The previous feasibility study determined that was not necessarily the most cost-effective solution to the issue," he said.

In lieu of dredging the river, DES has proposed removing the Buck Street dam in Pembroke to lower the water level and make riverside properties less likely to flood. Some sediment buildup would also likely clear out as a result, said Shane Csiki, a river expert with DES.

But Giuda said the change in the water level would be minimal and seeing a significant decrease in sediment buildup would take years. On average, 165 tons of sediment is being carried downstream each day, he said.

"They just dredged the Mississippi River, they do it all the time," he said. "Dredging rivers is not a big deal."

Csiki said dredging can be a very expensive and exacting process to make sure it only gets rid of unwanted material. He also said that, depending on where the dredging stops, it could create a ledge and cause water to move rapidly downstream. Giuda's bill would put the project in the hands of the Department of Transportation, which he said is more capable of contracting out large-scale projects.

DOT spokesman Bill Boynton said he's not aware of his agency ever handling a project that required moving a river and heavy dredging, but he said he wouldn't rule out any challenges.

"We know how to mobilize and get contractors on the scene," he said. "I just can't say we've done something of that nature."

Giuda said his focus is on the citizens living below the sandpit who have seen increased flooding and reduced property values because of the buildup of clay and silt. DES is "okay with the sediment rushing downstream," he said.

Landry acknowledged that DES's plan is not likely to stop the sandpit erosion, though he said that area is "starting to coarsen up a bit."

Burack said DES has a responsibility to safeguard riverside residents, but the agency has to look at the situation in a broader context and focus on protecting major infrastructure like the Route 4 bridge.

DES officials said ultimately neither their plan nor Giuda's will prevent the river from flooding in the future. Landry said he doubts the Legislature will be able to fund both proposals and hopes it would choose the agency's cheaper, less ambitious strategy.

"Is it a permanent solution for whatever people envision for the outcome of the Suncook River to be? Probably not," Landry said.

But Giuda sees his bill differently.

"We're offering a solution," he said.