

Pembroke

Mired in the muck

Upstream from Allenstown, it's silt that creeps into yards

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Tom Baumeister uses many four-letter words when describing how the Suncook River's change of course has affected his Pembroke home since 2006. Silt and clay are among the cleanest.

Step onto his riverfront property on Bachelder Road and you're likely to sink a few inches into squishy clay-like sediment that covers acres where grass used to grow. Baumeister, 54, estimates he's spent up to \$250,000 and hundreds of hours repairing his home and land since the 2006 Mothers Day flood pushed the river off its course and carved a new channel straight through an Epsom sandpit.



SARAH BETH GLICKSTEEN / Monitor staff

Tom Baumeister cleans up silt around his Pembroke home along the Suncook River yesterday. Whenever it rains, a deposit is made in Baumeister's yard. "I don't mind to work hard," he said. "I just like making progress. With this, it doesn't feel like you're getting anywhere."

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Now whenever it rains, the banks of the pit - about 5 miles upstream from Baumeister's house - erode into the river and are deposited downstream. While it's the silt that's been particularly damaging to Baumeister's property, repeated flooding has also plagued his neighbors and people further downstream in Allenstown, namely those on Riverside Drive.

For Baumeister, the solution is simple: Put the river back in its original channel. He's crusaded for the plan for years to fellow residents, town leaders, politicians and state officials. It has continued to fall on deaf ears, Baumeister said, and that angers him.

He blames Gov. John Lynch for "walking away" from an offer by Epsom's road agent, Gordon Ellis, weeks after the avulsion occurred to put the river back, for a price of \$250,000. He said Senate President Sylvia Larsen stopped returning his calls upon learning how expensive the solution would be, and he doesn't think the state Department of Environmental Services has done enough to remedy the dire situation.

Baumeister, a retired contractor who has lived on Bachelder Road nearly 35 years, believes the state should pay to repair the river because it owns a 14-acre parcel of land in the pit, next to where the erosion occurred. The town of Epsom also holds stake in a 5-acre parcel, according to state deed records. Months before the original flood, DES cited the pit's owners for removing too much gravel from the land - something that should have tipped officials off to the looming problem, he said.

"The state of New Hampshire should pay to fix this," Baumeister said while touring the pit with a reporter yesterday. Massive chunks of land that lined the banks last summer have since slid into the river about 25 feet below, part of a slowly expanding trench that's as wide as a football field in some places. "They've screwed this river up royally and no one seems to give a rat's a--."

Motivating others to take action and follow through has been a challenge, Baumeister said. Save for a few neighbors and contacts in nearby towns, people seem to have largely given up on finding a solution. In Allenstown, people accept the floods as "an act of God," instead of a sign that the river system is in trouble, he said.

When Allenstown floods, he said, it's because the water has nowhere to go because Pembroke's flood plains are saturated with silt.

Baumeister, who described himself as a "hermit" before the avulsion, said he'd prefer to go back to being anonymous. He'd also prefer not to wake up angry, or stressed out, or in pain because of a spinal disorder that's exacerbated by the hours he spends raking silt from his yard.

"Sometimes I find myself complaining and fighting everything, and I don't even know why," Baumeister said. "I used to be invisible, and I want to go back to that, you know what I mean?"

In the short term, the state should put up silt fences to catch some of the sediment coming from the pit, Baumeister said. It could also remove several of the dams downstream - including the Buck Street Dam - that clog the river up even more.

Billy Allaire and his wife, Faye, have lived down the street from Baumeister for 35 years. Their property has been affected, too, but mostly by the flooding. At his home yesterday, Allaire said he's also sick of waiting for a solution, but he agreed the dams need to go.

"They either need to put the river back or at least pull out the Buck Street Dam," Allaire said. "These politicians are just so full of it. They promised to help us, and they've done nothing. It's been devastating."

Steve Landry, Merrimack watershed supervisor for DES, said yesterday he empathizes with the frustration. For two years, Landry has spearheaded efforts to bring federal disaster mitigation grants to stabilize the Suncook River avulsion, or change of course. Last year, the grant request was rejected, and the state should hear back on its latest request soon, he said.