

At the river's whim

On its new course, the Suncook threatens his longtime home

By WALTER ALARKON
Monitor staff

May 02, 2007 8:00AM



KEN WILLIAMS / Monitor staff
Tom Baumeister has lived in a Bachelder Road cabin for 30 years. The Suncook River may soon change that.

Right now, the Suncook River takes a sharp right at Tom Baumeister's house in Pembroke. But, after two floods in less than a year, he worries that the river will soon go right through it.

"Everybody's getting the water damage," said Baumeister, who's lived in the Bachelder Road cabin for 30 years. "But the erosion - it's too much. It never happened before."

The Suncook flooded the properties of Baumeister, his neighbors and dozens of others in Pittsfield, Allenstown and Epsom last month. But the river has begun to dig into Baumeister's land; during the floods, it carved out a 3-foot-deep channel along the back of the house, exposing the foundation. Baumeister and officials from the state Department of Environmental Services think that the river is poised to take out his house.

Baumeister, a retired contractor, blames the new course that the river took during the 2006 Mothers Day floods. A year ago, the Suncook jumped its banks and took a shorter, straighter route through a sand and gravel pit in Epsom, just upstream from Baumeister.

"Now it's coming down with more force," he said. "It's picking up speed and relocating. It's literally going to take this whole house out. You can raise it up, and it will eat the land right under it."

He said the erosion is obvious. A fence that once separated his and his neighbor's land and is now lying beside the 3-foot hole. The river bank at his house is now uneven after the floods took chunks of it away. And he said his neighbor's 45-foot-long trailer floated a mile downstream.

Steve Couture, the state's rivers coordinator, said that while rivers change course all the time, the Suncook's new route and increased riverfront development have likely led to rapid changes in its behavior. Couture said it's probable that the sand dislodged from the pit has been deposited into the river, raising the river bed.

"The flood levels have likely been raised as well," he said. "Therefore, now the river is trying to find its balance more than before, and erosion is much more likely."

And with more development on the river, the river banks have less material to absorb water, he said.

Couture, who has visited the site along with Gov. John Lynch and other Department of Environmental Services officials, said it would take another major flood for the river to knock Baumeister's house loose. But with the river already establishing a channel around the other side of the house, it could be a matter of time.

"It's pretty close to imminent danger now," he said.

Baumeister said that the Suncook never flooded his house before last May. He said that in storms before last year's, the river would deposit some silt on his property but not much. During a storm in October 2005, he disposed of mud in his driveway in less than an hour, with a shovel, wheelbarrow and rake, he said. He has spent days and hired help to clean it after the past two floods.

"If this was normal flooding, I'd be in the same boat as everyone. But this crap?" he said, kicking a pile of silt outside. "I can't be digging five gallons of mud out every time."

----- End of article

By WALTER ALARKON