

Groundwater issue seeps into at-large council race

Although the South End and Back Bay are hardest hit, candidates see it as a citywide problem

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When candidates for city council at-large recently gathered to speak at a candidates' forum sponsored by political committees in Wards 4, 5 and 9, most of them talked about issues such as youth violence, public schools and the proposed Boston University Medical Center biolab. But one issue, which has been important to residents of the South End for years, also crept into the discussions: groundwater.

Unlike, say, the public school system, groundwater is still an issue that separates the neighborhoods in Boston. For places like the South End groundwater is highly important, but in far-off neighborhoods like Hyde Park, it barely shows up on the radar. However, as groundwater problems spread to new parts of the city (East Boston and the North End, for instance), the issue is slowly emerging as one some candidates

feel they should discuss.

"It's such a huge issue," said Matt O'Malley, an at-large candidate who addressed the issue at last month's candidates' forum, "it's nice to see how it's become [something] people are talking about."

When O'Malley canvasses neighborhoods and knocks on doors, "The vast majority of people are unfamiliar with it," he said. However, when he explains to them that groundwater depletion potentially threatens billions of dollars worth of real estate in the city, "people are interested."

"It is an issue that's garnering more attention," he said. To that extent, O'Malley says groundwater is "very much" a campaign issue for him.

For John Connolly, another at-large candidate who talked about the issue at the forum, groundwater is "absolutely" a campaign issue. "It impacts several of the neighborhoods," he said. "I've tried to make it a point to really learn about the issue."

While O'Malley and Connolly both agree that groundwater has become an important city issue,

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and while incumbent city councilor at-large Stephen Murphy said groundwater is one of his front-burner issues, all three candidates have voiced different ideas about how to deal with the problem.

Murphy insists groundwater is "not a campaign issue, it's a critical city issue." He said the city needs to form partnerships with the state, the MBTA and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority to tackle the problem.

"My hope is to create an independent authority," said Murphy, adding that this authority would be similar to the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which was tasked with cleaning up Boston Harbor, in that it would have a stated goal of improving the groundwater situation.

While monitoring wells are important, said Murphy, "we can monitor [them] all we want; now I want to take it to the next level."

Elliot Laffer, executive director of the Boston Groundwater Trust, an organization that monitors groundwater levels and raises awareness about the issue, said an agency like the one proposed by Murphy would be big enough to fund infrastructure repairs that would decrease groundwater depletion.

Boston's groundwater problems stem from the fact that much of the city is built on wood pilings in areas that used to be marshland or under water altogether. As long as those old wood pilings remain submerged in water, they're structurally sound. But the problem of groundwater seepage is a serious one. As the city has grown, structures have been built that draw water out of the ground. Everything from small basements to large tunnels and highways



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can get flooded. When the water is pumped out, it takes a valuable resource out of the ground. At the same time, because much of the city is covered with impervious surfaces, like streets, parking lots and buildings, rain doesn't recharge the depleted groundwater. The sewer system also takes groundwater away from where it's needed. When this happens, and wood pilings get exposed to air, they crumble and decay. Some of the city's largest and most expensive buildings are built upon these fragile foundations.

While "we're a little agency," said Laffer, a bigger agency like the one proposed by Murphy would include funding and engineering expertise from the state, MBTA and Turnpike Authority — all entities partly responsible for the groundwater problem — with the goal of fixing problematic infrastructure.

Of course, "the devil's in the details," said Laffer.

Connolly agreed that monitoring wells, which tell the Boston Groundwater Trust where problems exist, are a good step but not enough. Connolly proposes amending state building codes and city zoning laws to require new developments to recharge groundwater, he said, "so new development projects aren't exacerbating the problem."

"The state needs to step to the plate" with funding, he said, and so does the MBTA.

Connolly also proposes low interest loans to people who have had property damaged by groundwater depletion. "We need to take steps to relieve them financially," he said.

O'Malley said that, if elected, he would call for an ad hoc committee to deal with groundwater. He'd also call for more funding to the Boston Groundwater Trust, at least \$351,000 a year.

The trust recently received full funding for the year 2006, giving it an operating budget of \$296,000, an accomplishment lauded by Murphy, O'Malley and Connolly.

"Three hundred, fifty-one thousand dollars, I thought, was an extremely reasonable request," said O'Malley, who also said he'd "hold [the MBTA's] feet to the fire" on the issue.

Laffer, who seemed pleased at the 2006 funding levels, said "it's often a struggle," to raise money. With the full funding, the trust will add 300 monitoring wells to its existing collection of 529.

Photo: Rick Friedman



"The groundwater issue is not one of the two biggest issues facing the city," said at-large candidate Kevin McCrea, who added that education and housing are.

Another partial solution to the problem, said Laffer, would be to work with insurance companies to offer property owners some kind of groundwater insurance. It would be expensive, he said, but currently people don't even have the choice.

Laffer said the problem of groundwater "has become more visible." Connolly credited the trust with raising awareness about

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the issue. (Laffer said one of his jobs is to "nag" people about the problem.)

Groundwater problems now exist in the Fenway, the Back Bay, the South End, but also the North End, the Bullfinch Triangle, and East Boston, said Laffer. "It's a huge part of the city." Additionally, the neighborhoods affected by groundwater problems are those frequented by tourists and those that represent a huge portion of the city's assessed property values.

This is the issue, according to Murphy, that peaks peoples' interest in neighborhoods built on solid ground. Anything that affects the assessed value of expensive property downtown could throw property taxes out of whack across the whole city.

"We know the problem is expanding," said Murphy. But "I still think it's under cover of darkness" for most residents in the city.

As Laffer said, "you don't know you have a problem until you really have a problem."

All that said, city council at-large candidate Kevin McCrea, the only at-large candidate from the South End, didn't address the

issues of the groundwater at the forum. In a recent interview, he said he doesn't believe groundwater is one of the city's most important issues. When campaigning it's not something he talks about unless he's asked, he said.

"It's something I would address as a councilor," he said, but "the groundwater issue is not one of the two biggest issues facing the city." Those issues, he said, are education and housing. Groundwater simply isn't "equivalent in scope."

McCrea said a city planning agency would address groundwater. "I am talking about groundwater when I'm talking about eliminating the BRA and creating a city planning agency that would address issues such as groundwater," he said.

A developer and contractor, McCrea renovated his own home on West Springfield Street in the South End. When he did, he installed a well in his yard to recharge groundwater. In his work, he said, "I see storm drains connected to sewer lines all the time." He said a lot of people, even in the South End, aren't aware that groundwater is a problem. "People need to be informed about how important it is," he said.

But in the end, "I don't see groundwater as one of the two biggest issues facing the city.