

Groundwater Levels Are at Record Lows

by Thomas Grillo
Courant News Writer

The chair of a groundwater advocacy group aimed his most stinging criticism to date at the MBTA, saying that the transit agency has reneged on a promise to repair problems it created at a time when water levels are at record lows.

"We are increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress by the T," said Gordon Richardson of the Citywide Groundwater Emergency Task Force (Citywide GET), a group whose mission is to draw attention to groundwater problems. "We're looking for the beef and we haven't seen it."

A spokesperson defended the MBTA's groundwater record and said he has not seen evidence that the T is solely responsible for groundwater depletion in the South End and Back Bay.

"If someone has specific information that frees any other entity from responsibility, the T would be very interested in seeing the



Groundwater Trust Executive Director Elliott Laffer and technical coordinator Christian Simonelli tested a digital monitor.

Continued on page 21

Groundwater

continued from page 1

findings," said MBTA spokesperson Joseph Pesaturo via e-mail.

The controversy between the T and Citywide GET comes as 99 percent of the city's groundwater wells are showing lower water levels. Some of the readings are at the lowest levels in five years, including wells located at Columbus Avenue, Back and Beacon Streets and Appleton and Berkeley Streets. Another hotspot was located at Tremont and Chandler Streets, near the Orange Line, where the water level dropped by nearly two and one-half feet from February to April.

James W. Hunt, the city's environmental and energy services chief, attributed low groundwater levels to the lack of snow and rain.

Still, based on the findings at Chandler and Tremont, Hunt asked the Boston Water and Sewer Commission, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and the MBTA to investigate whether they are contributing to the problem. In addition, building permits for projects in the area were checked. Nothing conclusive was found, he said.

"We don't know of any major development that could be the culprit," Hunt said. "But we have taken the extra step to ask agencies with infrastructure in the area to check for leaks. We're examining building permits to see what is causing it. We take every incident seriously."

After years of lobbying City Hall and the State House, groundwater activists have finally convinced elected officials to deal with the problem. In the past year, eight city and state agencies signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding promising to work together toward a solution; the Legislature appropriated \$2 million to repair a groundwater hotspot and the BRA approved an overlay district to protect groundwater from future development.

The problem of low groundwater plagues some Boston neighborhoods. Much of the city was built on filled land during the 19th century housing boom. Since landfill alone could not support the buildings, telephone pole-sized wood pilings were driven into the ground. The foundations were built

atop the pilings.

Pilings can last hundreds of years as long as they remain under water. Leaks in sewer lines, subway tunnels and the Massachusetts Turnpike have lowered the groundwater level, which exposes the pilings to air and can result in structural damage. Repairs can cost \$250,000.

Richardson's comments came following a recent meeting with city and state officials to review groundwater remediation efforts. At that session, T officials presented an action plan to deal with a hotspot of groundwater depletion at Saint Charles and Cazenove Streets.

"Their plan lacks details," Richardson said. "It's inadequate, without any commitments and completely unacceptable."

State Representative Martha M. Walz, who attended the meeting, said the action plan for Saint Charles also failed to include community participation.

"The T must involve residents much earlier than they planned to do," she said. "They should not under any circumstances come up with a solution and present it to the community. The best approach is to devise options and present them to property owners before they proceed."

Last year, MBTA General Manager Daniel A. Grabauskas won praise from activists and homeowners when he pledged \$2.97 million for groundwater relief. At the time, he told *The Boston Courier* that it was time for the T to be part of the solution to the groundwater problem.

But Richardson said that the \$60,000 budgeted for fiscal year 2007 is not enough to deal with such a massive problem that is destroying foundations today.

"The T has known about this for several years. They made excuses that they don't have money. What's the hold up?" he said.

In an e-mail response, Pesaturo acknowledged that only enough money for Phase I of the project is available for FY07. The other phases will require the redistribution of funding in the T's Capital Investment Program over the next five years, he wrote.

The Boston City Council will hold a hearing on Thursday, May 18 at City Hall at 6 pm to review remediation action taken by the Boston Groundwater Trust, the city and the state.