

Groundwater Poses \$10.4 Billion Problem



Participants in last week's groundwater forum

**by Jason Burrell
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Kathleen Kolar grabbed the attention of the nearly 400 audience members at last week's Groundwater Educational Forum when her PowerPoint presentation flashed the number 10.4 billion on the screen.

That is the approximate dollar value of property at risk from being damaged by low groundwater levels in Wards Four and Five, which include the Back Bay, Beacon Hill, Fenway and South End.

"It's going to be a challenging thing to get the city, state and federal governments collectively

working on this issue," she said. "But let's look at the cost of inaction."

Kolar, a Back Bay groundwater activist, was one of a series of speakers at the forum, which was held at the Boston Public Library's Rabb Lecture Hall.

Residents filled all available

Continued on page 18

Groundwater

continued from page 1

seats and spilled over into the aisles at the event hosted by the Groundwater Emergency Taskforce (GET), a coalition of 22 civic associations that is lobbying the government to address low groundwater through legislation and preventative programs.

"Literally the health of the city depends on us investing now," said Kolar.

Low groundwater affects older buildings in Boston that were built on wood pilings. These foundations can last for a millennium as long as the wood is not exposed to air. If groundwater retreats and air seeps in, the pilings rot, causing serious structural damage to the building.

It can cost as much as \$400,000 to underpin, or secure with steel and concrete, a house's rotten foundation.

"Fix your pilings today. It's not going to get any cheaper," said Lewis Lloyd, a Beacon Hill resident who poured \$250,000 into securing the foundation beneath his row house. Kolar estimated that it would cost \$1 billion to underpin all of the local homes and businesses that are at risk from low groundwater.

Property owners can help recharge groundwater in their neighborhoods by capturing rainwater on the roof and ensuring that it soaks into a lawn. Because of the number of roofs and amount of pavement in Boston, rain that would naturally keep groundwater at adequate levels is instead often drained into the Charles River.

One theme of the forum, however, was that residents' options for helping the problem are limited. Government intervention is needed, they argued.

The speakers contended that the government can

take several steps such as granting continual funding for installing and monitoring wells that measure groundwater levels; repairing leaking infrastructure that creates a path for water to drip out of the ground and into underground structures such as pipes and tunnels; and enforcing preventative programs, such as those overseeing construction sites where digging and pumping water can often exacerbate the problem.

"We must formalize our right to sufficient groundwater," said GET member Peter Pogorski. "We must regulate construction where groundwater is critical."

Pogorski added that leaks at the Big Dig tunnel, where water is being pumped to the river instead of recharged into the ground, are prime examples of why better regulation at construction sites is needed.

"[This] suggests we can't just blame our forefathers," he said. "We need enforcement to insist groundwater is taken seriously."

Pogorski also advocated fining people who pump away water that could be recharged into the ground.

No specific legislation was outlined at the forum, but the speakers urged audience members to get involved and pressure government officials to act.

"You have our attention. Keep it," State Rep. Byron Rushing (D-South End) advised the crowd.

Andrew Gottlieb, deputy secretary for the Office of Commonwealth Development, said his agency is working with the MBTA to ensure that construction for the new Silver Line bus tunnel will not negatively affect groundwater.

"We will make sure that the MBTA, at a minimum, doesn't worsen groundwater levels in construction, and we're looking at ways they can actually help during the construction of the tunnel," he said.