



Low Water Levels Hitting Back Street

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Groundwater levels along Back Street are low enough to threaten the wood pilings upon which many homes in the Back Bay rest, according to recent readings by the Groundwater Trust.

Eleven of the 12 observation wells between Arlington and Clarendon Streets on Back Street in June showed groundwater levels there to be under five feet, the av-

erage benchmark below which foundations begin decaying, the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay's (NABB) Groundwater Committee learned from the trust two weeks ago.

A member of NABB's groundwater committee who asked to remain anonymous said the Arlington Street underpass on Storrow Drive is in disrepair and is probably drawing groundwater away from the Back Street area. Ground-

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water levels fall when structures such as sewers, subway tunnels or highway facilities draw water away from the pilings.

"It's an extremely poor report that's indicating something is severely wrong, the first and foremost suspect being the tunnel," the committee member said. "It's been believed that the condition of the underpass has been in decline for a number of years."

Gravity causes groundwater to drain from wood piles into the underpass through cracks in its tunnel, which is further below ground than the wood pilings, according to the source.

NABB Chairperson Marianne Castellani said the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) should address the problem.

"NABB is extremely concerned about the groundwater issue on Back Street," she said. "The seri-

ousness of the water level problem warrants an immediate water recharging program by the MDC."

The MDC would not comment specifically on the Back Street groundwater levels because the issue is under litigation, but the commission is looking into the problem, according to spokesperson Jay Lachance.

"We are certainly aware of the issues and are currently in the process of assessing and investigating the problem," he said. Lachance would not elaborate on the legal proceedings.

Most buildings in the Back Bay that are more than 80 years old rest on underground wooden pilings immersed in groundwater. If the water level decreases enough to expose the wood to air the foundations will begin to rot. Most foundations need to be submerged in at least five feet of groundwater, according to the trust.

Groundwater concerns such as the one on Back Street have led to a flurry of public hearings and pos-

sible state assistance for the Trust, which installs and monitors observation wells that check groundwater levels.

NABB and Environment Department Director Antonia Pollak, whom the city appointed to respond to groundwater concerns, will soon hold a public hearing.

"By the end of September or early October we will be having another public meeting, and I will be reporting on our progress to date and our future plans," she said. "I promised I would do that. I made a commitment to do that."

The State House in August passed the Environmental Bond Act, which would give the City of Boston \$1.6 million to give to the Trust, but the organization will not know if the money will materialize for at least one more month.

The Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), the Executive Office of Administration and Finance and Acting Governor Jane Swift will decide within four to seven weeks which measures in the Bond Act to fund. Only \$127 million of the \$700 million in the bill can be funded this year because of state regulations.

"Obviously not all the projects in the environmental bond bill are going to get funded," said EOEA spokesperson Doug Pizzi. "It's impossible to say right now" which ones will receive funding, he added.

City Councilors Jim Kelly and Mike Ross, Pollak and other city and state officials will meet with Secretary of Environmental Affairs Robert Durand to push for the approval of the funding. The meeting will most likely occur before the end of September, according to Kelly.

"I think the secretary is sympathetic and wants to be helpful, but we all know money is the issue," he said. "I certainly don't want to be overly optimistic."