

City Getting Its Head Above Groundwater



This drawing was developed from data on the Boston Groundwater Trust website. The brown indicates where most structures are on wood piles. The red is where average groundwater level has been below tops of piles and below Elevation 5. The green is where average groundwater level has been above Elevation 5 for the past two to three years. Elevation 5 is considered to be the level of most wood piles. Where there is no red or green, there is no data on groundwater level for at least the past four years.

by Dustin Goot
Courant News Writer

The City of Boston may be taking initial steps toward addressing the groundwater problem that threatens many local properties.

Following criticism by local residents of the city's general silence

on groundwater, Public Works Commissioner Joseph Casazza and Environment Department Director Antonia Pollak will host a public meeting on Wednesday, June 12 to discuss "the groundwater issue in the South End and Back Bay," according to a printed announcement.

This meeting marks the city's first public response to an issue that has been gaining steam with local residents for several months. Two weeks ago concerned citizens filled the Lyric Stage Theatre on Clarendon Street, where the Ellis South End Neighborhood Association organized an educational fo-

rum on Boston's groundwater threat.

Low groundwater levels endanger property owners because the wooden pilings that serve as building foundations in many areas of the city can crumble away if they are not continually submerged in water.

Casazza's stance on groundwater is particularly important to those seeking to fix the problem since his department has been cited in the past as an impediment to potential corrective measures.

The Boston Groundwater Trust, an independent, city-chartered agency which monitors groundwater levels, has been trying to expand the city's network of around 150 observation wells. Engineers have estimated that 1,000 wells would be required to provide adequate coverage of Boston's vulnerable areas.

The trust has attempted to add wells by raising money to dig its own or reaching agreements with private entities who could dig wells during their construction projects and turn them over to the trust.

However, when applications have been filed to the Public Improvement Commission (PIC) to dig wells, permits have either not been issued in a timely manner or issued with a proviso that wells be filled in when construction projects are complete, thereby rendering the wells useless to the trust.

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The Groundwater Trust submitted an application to the PIC in November 2001 to dig 35 wells but permits were not granted until earlier this month. In 2000 the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay (NABB) negotiated an agreement with Level 3 Communications to dig four wells along Massachusetts Avenue on behalf of the trust, but permits were issued on the condition that the wells be filled in after one year. A developer at 131 Dartmouth Street, who was to install six wells, waited over six months to receive permits that also contained the limiting proviso.

NABB President Marty Walz said, "Until recently, the city's regulatory agencies were unwilling to allow the trust to go forward and

dig monitoring wells."

Representatives of Level 3 and Lyme Properties, the developer of 131 Dartmouth, could not confirm whether or not their wells were dug. However, the Groundwater Trust suspects that they were not, given that no trust member has received notification that the wells exist.

Casazza stated that the proviso requiring wells to be filled in after construction "has nothing to do with keeping them from the Groundwater Trust" but is a public safety measure to protect people from tripping over wells that might remain in the ground. He said the delay in issuing permits to the groundwater trust was an oversight, which he instructed his staff to correct, and that he was not aware of any other permitting delays.

"We didn't do anything wrong

in my opinion," Casazza stated.

Tim Mitchell, co-chair of the Groundwater Trust, said, "Following discussions with NABB and the mayor's office, we were pleased that Commissioner Casazza was able to give us his attention and resolve the outstanding issues [with the trust's permits]." He continued, "We hope that applications of other groups that have agreed to install observation wells will be pushed forward as well."

Casazza said that he was willing to discuss arrangements whereby the trust could assume responsibility of wells installed by private entities, adding, "We should not stand in the way of [the trust]."

The city's public meeting on groundwater will take place at the Boston Public Library's Mezzanine Conference Room on Wednesday, June 12 at 6:30 pm.

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