

City Pulls Plug On Groundwater Money

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Apparently renegeing on a promise it made at the beginning of this fiscal year, the city has stated that it will no longer fund the organization established to keep track of potential groundwater problems in Boston.

The Boston Groundwater Trust, which oversees the monitoring of observation wells that measure groundwater levels in the city, had expected its expenses this year to be covered by the city. Gary Saunders, co-chair of the trust, said, "Our understanding was that [the city's Chief Financial Officer] Ed Collins had committed to have the city fund \$50,000 of our operating budget."

Now the city has stated that the funding is not available. Lisa Pollack, a spokesperson for the



mayor, said the trust would not receive any money from the city during fiscal years 2002 or 2003. She explained that the trust was set up to be an independent entity and that the city never intended to fund it on an ongoing basis.

The groundwater trust was established in 1986 to gather infor-

mation on groundwater levels in Boston and make it available to the public. Large decreases in groundwater levels can cause deterioration of wooden pilings that serve as the structural foundation for many city neighborhoods.

City Councilor Michael Ross,

who represents areas in the Back Bay, Beacon Hill and the Fenway that are susceptible to groundwater damage, said he was present when Collins promised to provide funding for the trust.

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continued on page 18

Groundwater

continued from page 1

Bob Fleming, director of the Boston Trust Office. "That commitment was made subject to appropriation. No appropriation was made." Referring to Collins' promise, Fleming said, "I don't think it was an empty commitment, but the economy has changed." The city had given the trust \$25,000, \$25,000, and \$50,000 respectively since 1999 before ending its contributions this year.

Members of the trust were unaware of any contingencies on the city's funding commitment. Contrary to published reports in other periodicals that trust members were informed of a loss of funding, Saunders said, "We have not been notified in any way, shape or form that the funding does not exist."

Saunders also noted that the city has paid at least \$13,000 of the trust's expenses during this fiscal year, leading him to believe that the funding status was unchanged.

Fleming acknowledged that

there was "a bit of confusion" regarding the organization's funding, and that, as of press time, no one from the city had communicated with the trust about the lack of appropriations. He explained that money paid during this year was a carryover from previous years' budgets. The trust is due to receive an additional \$40,000 in carryover funds.

Fleming and other city officials said that the trust should have been raising money elsewhere. Tim Mitchell, co-chair of the trust, responded that the organization had raised \$50,000 from other sources but wanted to use that money for building additional observation wells, not paying operating expenses.

Mitchell also stated that soliciting additional funds would be more difficult without some level of city support. "Before other people will come in, they need to feel that the city has backed [the trust]."

Ross declared, "It is most certainly the responsibility of local government to take care of this issue." Though he was still waiting for city officials to confirm

the funding loss, Ross said he felt the budget office would not be acting in good faith by failing to cover the trust's operating budget this year.

"The problem has not gone away, so the funding should not go away," Ross continued, arguing that the city should support the trust's activities not only now but in the future. "The state of the budget should have no bearing on this issue."

Antonio Pollak, director of the city's Environmental Department, explained that if the city intended to fund the trust on an ongoing basis, the group's expenses would be assigned to a particular department, which they are not. She said, "Nobody's budgeted to fund the operation of this trust."

Mitchell said that the trust is still evaluating its options and waiting for confirmation from the city that money is not forthcoming. He indicated that the trust would take steps to try to get the city to honor its funding commitment.

Mitchell did not want to speculate about the Trust's future without city backing.

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