

# Groundwater talks continue

## Taskforce hopes action soon to follow

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Susan Scott has lived on Cazenove Street in the Ellis neighborhood for 25 years, but she didn't know she was sitting on a groundwater "hot spot" until this spring.

"[St. Charles Street residents] Mike [Naimé] and Peter [Pogorski] invited the neighbors for a morning get-together and told us all about groundwater. Everybody's jaw dropped. I was stunned," said Scott. Due to insufficient groundwater, some of Boston's historic houses might be in danger of collapsing, including those owned by Scott and her neighbors on St. Charles and Cazenove streets.

Since that eye-opening morning, Scott has transformed from a groundwater naif to an activist. After attending a June city meeting that left them frustrated, Scott and her neighbors formed the Groundwater Emergency Taskforce (GET) in July. Scott is the new president. This fall GET hopes remedial efforts by the city or the

state will begin.

Homes such as the brick townhouses in Scott's neighborhood, constructed on landfill primarily in the 19th century, are built on wood pilings (resembling long, thin, wooden stilts) surrounded by earth. If the ground contains sufficient water, the pilings stay moist and supportive. If the groundwater level falls and the pilings dry out, destructive bacteria "eat" the wood, compromising the pilings' ability to support the houses sitting upon them. In the St. Charles/Cazenove street area, the groundwater levels are frequently low enough that parts of the piling are exposed.

Some residents, including Pogorski and Scott, believe their hot spot might be, in part, the result of the MBTA's building of Back Bay station and related tracks in the early 1980s. In particular, they cite a leak into which groundwater flows, and then is piped off for wastewater treatment instead of returned to the ground. Some estimate that total deterioration of St. Charles Street piles may occur within three to five years.

The news that stunned Scott and her neighbors is actually old news, something various city agencies and residents have known about, at least as a theoretical possibility, for decades. In 1940, under the guise of

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the Works Progress Administration Program, a "groundwater level survey of certain areas of the city of Boston" was conducted, including a special study "in the vicinity of the Hotel Lenox."

Gary Saunders, co-chair of the Boston Groundwater Trust, formed

in 1986 to address groundwater issues, owns the Lenox. The Back Bay hotel, like the Ellis homes, is built on piles. And Saunders' family has been addressing the situation since the 1960s. "We recharge," he said, though he adds

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that individual recharging is not an option for everyone. "Each building has its own particular situation," he explained.

Recharging involves, basically, placing water back in the ground. It's not necessarily a long-term solution, but it is a measure that will preserve the piles for the short term. GET members have reason to hope recharging efforts will soon begin in the ground under their homes.

"I think simply forming a formal organization may have been a catalyst," said Carter Jefferson, Ellis resident and GET member. "A few individuals, notably Mike Nairne and Peter Pogonski, had been trying to get somebody's attention for a year. Now the agencies at least are listening."

Both Jefferson and Scott cite state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs' Karl Honkonen, director of water policy, and Regina McCarthy, of the newly created state Office of Commonwealth Development, as being particularly responsive. "Honkonen really knows water, and Gina knows politics," said Scott.

Honkonen gives credit to Doug Foy, McCarthy's boss and secretary of the OCD, for getting the groundwater discussion started. Foy, said Honkonen, pulled "to-

gether various interests within the Conservation and Recreation department, and brought in the MBTA, myself, and representatives from Mayor Menino's office to look at both short- and long-term issues." Since then the group has held several meetings.

Honkonen said while recharging will take place at the Ellis hot spot, many issues — who pays, who will do the actual work involved — are "not yet resolved." He hopes to "measure this in weeks" and add that the concerns of Ellis have been heard. He says his office "understands the extent of the problem" and is committed to getting groundwater restored.

One reason why recharging — which Scott said is "easy and cheap in the overall scheme of things" — hasn't yet begun is that no one has actually claimed responsibility for causing or fixing the problem. Though neighbors point to the T and around Back Bay Station, no consensus has been reached about the reasons for the St. Charles/Cazenove hot spot.

As for fixing the problem, whoever claims responsibility for addressing the groundwater issue might be setting an expensive precedent. Boston is full of homes built on landfill, sitting on wood piles. Some may be safe forever, but future hotspots will likely be identified in other locations, via increased Groundwater Trust monitoring and other efforts. The

problem areas will need to be addressed if historic houses (and their taxpaying owners) are to remain "afloat." As Scott sees it, Boston's groundwater headaches are likely just beginning. GET's efforts — and the city and state responses — should be closely watched.

"We've got a scary, serious hotspot," said Scott, "but we're lucky. It just so happens that we know what we've got. But this is just the tip of the iceberg."

Now, Scott and her GET cohorts are waiting for action. They're scheduled to meet with the OCD's McCarthy on Sept. 2 to find out what, if anything, happens next.

Though Jefferson is hopeful, he remains cautious. "Most of us are pretty familiar with politics, and know that the runaround is the usual answer if it can be arranged. We think the people we've talked to are sincere, and will try, but they don't have the actual power." He said the T's "stalling" doesn't help, nor does the state's current fiscal situation.

Scott is somewhat more upbeat. "We're in a honeymoon period. Now that we're organized, it feels like something could happen."

The next GET meeting takes place on Sept. 8.