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Dredging bypasses river highway

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Spring waters are gushing down the Hudson, so a curious man's fancy turns naturally to thoughts of PCBs.

As expected, levels coming over the federal dam in Troy are spiking. Monitors set up by General Electric show 2,000 parts per trillion of polychlorinated biphenyls in the water, four times the allowable limit. Then again, with all the acknowledged resuspension activity that went on during the long summer of dredging last year up in the Fort Edward area, this comes as no surprise. In another year or two at the most, those spikes will likely plummet to within the acceptable as long as no new sources of PCBs are introduced upstream.

Ah, but there's the rub. What if we have a six-year, or more likely a 10-year, project ahead, raising spikes year after year? How much resuspension is too much? And for how long? And what do we do about it?

General Electric and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency use the same data and come up with different answers to this central question. But then, that's no big surprise either.

This is an off-year for actually dredging the river. That's so all parties involved can analyze the results of Phase 1 and create from them a bigger and better Phase 2.

Besides that, and perhaps more importantly, it's also a year to reflect on what we want the river to be when the dredging's all done. What we can reasonably expect to accomplish, and how we can make it happen. Now is our last best chance at filling in the big picture before the solutions of choice are agreed to and the engineers cement the details. Once that happens, our options vanish.

Consider this: The tortured dredging process that began more than 30 years go, that has polarized citizens and over which millions have been spent on persuasion alone, has been focused on finding an acceptable remedy for an environmental problem.

Yet, any reasonable read of the situations show there's more to the problem than

environmental issues. Let's say it's 2020 and GE has just finished recapping and revegetating the last hotspot that has been dredged. What would we be left with? Presumably, much better water quality, agreed.

But at the same time, GE barges taking toxic sediment to the dewatering facility would be carrying half loads. And other larger boat traffic would remain minimal, adversely affecting economic development along this entire corridor.

And why is that?

Because most of the upper river desperately needs navigational dredging as well as environmental dredging. They are not the same thing.

For reasons that remain murky, the state never actively pushed for navigational dredging as part of the consent order signed by the EPA and GE, even though PCBs are the reason the channel is silted in from the Troy dam to Fort Edward.

By state regulation, the channel is supposed to be a minimum 12 feet deep to allow commercial tugs and barges to use the Champlain Canal, which along this stretch is actually the Hudson. In some places, the silt is so bad that the canal has only three feet of water, effectively blocking commercial traffic.

Yet no navigational dredging has been done in the Champlain Canal for 25 years, because the PCB-laden sediment the state Canal Corporation would have to extract would be prohibitively expensive to dispose of, in excess of \$300 a ton.

It's not that the Canal Corporation, past and present, hasn't sounded the alarm over the need for navigational dredging. It's that nobody at the negotiating table took it seriously enough.

Well, now's the time. The present Canal Corporation executive director, Carmella Mantello, says it would cost the state \$100 million it doesn't have to do the necessary navigational dredging. Environmental dredging, at its best, will only remove about 15 percent of what's needed for navigation.

So why not introduce the navigational in Phase 2 discussions? GE's dredging barges will be on the river, the dewatering facility is built and operating beautifully.

Now, this is a late addition to the menu. And frankly, the state has not done its homework on research and design. Raising this costly item with GE at this juncture ought to be done delicately.

If GE goes along with it, the company will want something in return. That's understandable, since this is not work included in the consent order. Giving GE a major credit against a financial claim the state is expected to file over natural resources

damages is justified, at the least.

It makes no sense to spend all the public's energies on getting purer water from environmental dredging of the upper Hudson, while ignoring the need to return the river to its former usefulness as a commercial and even a recreational highway. An upper river that only a canoe or kayak can get to is purely idiotic.

And it makes little sense to put off handing GE the bill for navigational dredging until later. What makes sense is to do it now, while the resources to deal with it are at hand.

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