

Epsom

River's future is still fluid

State, residents debate Suncook's new route

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Epsom residents want their river moved back.

Yesterday, about 50 people heard state scientists describe how the Suncook River charted a new course during last month's floods. When the residents were asked what they wanted to happen to the river, three-quarters said they wanted the old path restored. The rest said they weren't sure yet. None of the residents wanted to leave the river where it is now.

Before the heavy rains on Mother's Day, the Suncook River split into two channels along a stretch in Epsom. On May 15 and 16, with the Suncook's waters overflowing its banks, the river took a new, shorter path, through a gravel and sand pit.

State officials raised several ecological concerns last night about the river's shift. They said it would be cheaper to leave the river alone, but they did not provide concrete plans for its future, saying they needed to study it more.

Residents worried more about the impact on residents. The river now runs through the gravel pit and cornfields on the fire chief's dairy farm, and it no longer runs along the Elks Lodge on Route 28. Since the shift, its waters have been brown, raising questions about the river's wildlife.

Bruce Graham, a resident, asked officials how much they would take into account the river's impact on residents when they make a recommendation on the river's future.

Steve Couture, the state's river coordinator, said that they would take into account all factors and that the residents and the town would help decide what's to be done. The state will make a recommendation within a year, "a snapshot in geological time," he said

"But you deal with geological time, we don't," Graham replied.

Couture said he is seeking more money to further study the impact of the shift and the cost of reversing it. The Legislature will likely have to come up with that money, state geologist Fred Chormann said.

Geologists presented maps that showed the river's new channel to be straighter, steeper and farther southeast than the old ones. The new channel is about half a mile long. The older two

channels were 1.52 miles and 0.4 miles long. The grade of the new channel is 23 feet per mile, 7 more feet per mile than the older channels.

State geologist Chad Wittkop said earlier excavations at the gravel pit may have lowered the river banks by 10 feet, making a breach there more likely. But he added that the river would have naturally eroded away the sand and forced a breach.

Ralph Cutting, whose family owns the pit, said the river's waters were so strong during the floods they would have charted a new course regardless of whether there was a sand pit there or a wooded area. In an interview after the meeting, Cutting said he wanted the river returned to its old path so that he can reopen the pit, which has its entrance blocked by the new river channel.

The river's move has already affected wildlife, said state biologist Eric Orff. The dry channels also revealed that the Suncook River in Epsom had been a home for brook floater mussels, an endangered species, Orff said. About 1,100 of the mussels had been recovered, and the state Fish and Game Department was trying to find a new home for them, he said.

Orff said the river is still carving a deeper and wider route through its new banks. Further studies will help determine whether the sand in the waters will affect species.

"You had bedrock controls before," Orff said. "It's now just a wide swath with sandy bottoms, which is not too kind to a diverse habitat."

The water commissioner and the fire chief were concerned about the water supply for 300 homes near Black Hall Road and Route 107. That neighborhood relied on two wells, one of which was flooded and can't be used, Water Commissioner Kevin Reeves said. Firefighters use water from those wells during emergencies at those homes, said Fire Chief Stewart Yeaton.

"We have a 180-bed nursing home that relies on water from that river," Yeaton said. "The town will have to come up with another water source."

Yeaton and his brother, Bill, run a dairy farm where cornfields were engulfed by the river's new channel. While Stewart supported moving the river back, Bill said he would reserve judgment until he knows more about the options.

The geologists said the Suncook shift was New Hampshire's first. Chormann said the Trout River in Vermont had shifted recently but said it didn't move as drastically as the Suncook did.

"Essentially, (the Trout River) was in the same valley, finding another path through that valley," he said. "This is different. This is creating a new valley."

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