

5/2/02

We, The People: Taking Back Our River!

I am not an expert. Certainly not according to General Electric and The Environmental Protection Agency. In their eyes, none of us are. And therefore the citizens and residents of Berkshire County have no official standing in the decision making process about our river's future. But it does not require expertise to pass judgment on what has already befallen The Housatonic and what is being proposed for the rest of our river.

General Electric's recently publicized plans have gotten people angry, and rightly so. When The Consent Decree was initially unveiled, we were asked to put aside our objections, to trust "the experts," and we obliged. In hindsight, it was a mistake. One needs to look no further than Hill 78; a terrible solution for and an unnecessary imposition on our region. And nearby is the two miles of remediated river that bears little resemblance to the river of only a few years ago. Perhaps it's time for the experts to make room at the table.

There are at least three competing perspectives influencing the design of the cleanup. General Electric, the polluter is almost exclusively fixated on cost containment. The EPA, subject to political influence, attempts to fulfill its mission to be protective of public and environmental health in a cost effective and timely fashion. And the rest of us are a ragtag, fractured citizenry, marginalized and victimized by a process in which we were told that we had no direct influence or legal standing. For the most part we did as we were told. We remained silent and disinterested during the process and sullen, but complacent in its aftermath. Our community has paid the price for our compliance. Perhaps it is time for our perspective to be heard and to be incorporated. It is, after all, our river.

There are three overarching considerations influencing the scope of the cleanup.

First, how many PCBs need to be taken out of circulation to provide a "safe" environment? The response is guided by how "safe" has most recently been defined, by what is deemed to be an

“acceptable” risk. As new studies are conducted and their conclusions released, the target numbers are almost always lowered. Today’s cleanup may be inadequate by tomorrow’s standards.

Then once the level of cleanup has been decided upon, how is it going to be achieved? The answer calls for a mix of precedent, technology and cost. Do we use shovels or vacuum pumps? Do we treat the contaminated soil or rebury it? Do we leave it here or send it to another community? And so on...

And finally, what will it look like when the cleanup is completed? This decision should be guided by aesthetics, common sense, a concern for the river and other human considerations. However it is principally driven by cost and expediency. Rather than being defined by those who appreciate, care for and spend time on the river, the solution will be the product of engineers, unimpeded by a vision that transcends mere function.

From the perspective of human and environmental health and safety, it is beyond argument that we are better off having the PCBs removed. However looking at the results of the recently completed “expert” intervention in Pittsfield, many have gotten understandably nervous about the next phase of the cleanup. Fearing “more of the same,” it is understandable that there are already calls to abandon the cleanup entirely.

Yet regardless of the level of opposition to the cleanup, it is highly unlikely that the EPA will walk away from the Housatonic. They are compelled to take action. Years of investigation and millions of dollars have unearthed sufficient evidence that demands an earnest and vigorous response.

We have been given the Hobson’s choice of either a polluted or an over-engineered river. However the successful removal of PCBs does not out of necessity lead to a restoration failure. Opposition to a cleanup will not only end in failure, it disregards the impact the remaining PCBs will have on future generations, an immoral option. I believe we have much more of an opportunity to influence the mission than to oppose it. We have the right to insist on a cleanup **and** a river.

The “experts” are rarely visionaries. They are the technocrats, the “how to” people. Health studies, scientific consensus and acts of congress define the problems the EPA/GE are then given to solve. It is up to us to redefine the problem thereby influencing the outcome.

In designing a house, we take for granted that the outcome should be a collaborative reflection of the vision and expertise of the client, the architect, the engineer and the general contractor. Why should designing a cleanup be any different?

To continue the metaphor, the unacknowledged clients are the residents of Berkshire County and all the counties in Connecticut that stretch down to Long Island Sound. Although it is our river, we have never been asked for our vision, the kind of house/river we would like, whether it is to be constructed of wood or stone or which architect we would prefer. We are the end users and it is our dollars that will pay for the remediation and restoration. How is it that our needs and wishes have never been taken seriously or incorporated?

The project is being designed by engineers who will meet load, stress and other structural requirements without the benefit or guidance of architectural oversight.

The EPA's "expertise" needs to be balanced by common sense and intelligence. Their computer model needs to be countered by an approach guided by human experience and sensitivity.

For a variety of reasons, the complex ten-mile stretch from the confluence of East and West branches to Woods Pond and beyond has been discussed as if it were one project. Obvious to all who have had direct experience of the river, its scale and complexity need to be divided into a number of smaller projects, each begging for human assessment.

Some choices about what, where and how to clean will be relatively easy. Let's begin with the easy ones. Others will require pooling the expertise of scientists, sportsmen and other stakeholders, those with real and abstract knowledge about our specific river. Some areas may be too fragile, unique or beautiful to dredge. We may have to wait to see if and when less invasive technology becomes available. These are the kinds of decisions we, along with the experts, can and should be making.

Our assignment for the EPA should insist on a design that includes creativity and fluidity, that evolves as technology evolves, as surely it will. Perhaps the initial goal could be modest, a phased approach, the first of a number of five year plans. Upon completion, a review of current information about PCBs and remedial technology, then another five year plan, etc. An all-inclusive design for a project spanning decades can't possibly go right. It is an obvious failure in the making.

To help redefine the problem, we need to reach agreement on the following issues:

Do we want another landfill anywhere in Berkshire County?

What do we want our river to look like when everyone else goes home?

Do we want to be able to fish (to eat the fish) and to swim in our river?

Are we willing to wait a bit longer in order to more fully evaluate the potential of remedial technologies for our river i.e. an inclusive, pilot-test program?

This list is not complete; feel free to add to it. If our collective vision is to end up with a river that resembles the one we currently have, minus the PCBs, we must become knowledgeable, committed and fully engaged. We must become visible, noisy and undeterred. If we are able to agree and insist on the broad parameters, the “experts” can fill in the details.

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