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Breakthrough on Blackwell Island Controversy

Revised plan would remove highly contaminated sediments from flood prone area where Lake Coeur d'Alene empties to the Spokane River.

In a significant victory for the Spokane River, a Hagadone Corporation subsidiary has agreed to a major change to the controversial redevelopment of a marina on Blackwell Island.

Under an earlier proposal, the Marine Yacht Club, LLC, would have left 15,000 cubic meters of highly contaminated sediments on the island. With the new change, however, the sediments will be hauled to an off-site disposal area. Blackwell Island is situated right where Lake Coeur d'Alene empties into the Spokane River, in an area that also provides recharge to the Spokane Valley/Rathdrum Prairie aquifer.

"After four years, the developer is finally doing what he should do to protect the environment and public health," says Wes Hanson, the vice president of the board for Kootenai Environmental Alliance. "A persistent public asked critical questions and proposed reasonable alternatives that resulted in a project which by-and-large benefits the environment and community."

The revisions were disclosed as the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality notified the Army Corps of Engineers about conditions it was imposing on the redevelopment project under the IDEQ's federal Clean Water Act authority.

Sediments on and around Blackwell Island are contaminated with heavy metals from Silver Valley mining wastes that have flowed into the lake from the east for decades.

The main concern that the Idaho Conservation League, the Kootenai Environmental Alliance, Idaho Rivers United, The Lands Council, and the Spokane Riverkeeper have raised about the planned marina expansion is that extensive dredging planned at the marina's yacht basin not lead to contaminants being re-suspended in the Spokane River. The river flows westward from the island toward Post Falls and Spokane.

Much of the concern involved the plan to keep large volumes of contaminated dredging spoils in lined basins. During high runoff years, the lake level can rise to the point where the entire island is under water--a condition that understandably raises the prospect of the contaminated soils being resuspended in the river.

"The fact that the most-polluted sediments will now be hauled to a commercial waste facility instead of being stored on the island is great news for everyone who lives or recreates along the Spokane River," says Susan Drumheller, the North Idaho Associate for the Idaho Conservation League. "We consider this a victory for anyone who was concerned about placing a hazardous waste facility atop an island that experiences frequent flood events."

The re-construction of the Blackwell island marina is expected to take six years. In order to prevent resuspension of contaminants during the dredging process, the certification from IDEQ requires the use of silt fences, coffer dams, and plastic covering over exhumed sediment piles. It

also requires monitoring for turbidity and metals during the construction period. As a result of the agreement to dispose of the highest contaminated sediments off-site, all of the long-term monitoring requirements that would have come with disposal on the island have been dropped.

Says Terry Harris, the executive director of Kootenai Environmental Alliance:

"The overarching issue for us at KEA, and the rest of the environmental community, was that the original proposal was designed to dredge the very toxic river bottom, and place the toxic spoils right back on the island -- in 'confined disposal facilities' (CDFs) still in the flood plain. As a result of our comments, the applicant has decided to dispose of the most toxic sediments off site, out of the way of the frequent flooding of that location. We tend to think this shift in the plan is a big win for those of us concerned with protecting the Spokane River from further toxic contamination. And although the certification does not provide for the extensive independent monitoring at the site that we had requested, much of that concern for monitoring was driven by the CDFs in the original proposal. By removing the most toxic sediments from the site, the need for monitoring is less acute."

Because of the way the federal Clean Water Act's 401 certification process works, the state's certification conditions will automatically shape the Army Corps of Engineers permit for the marina expansion project.

Among those feeling positive about the change in the project is Julie Dalsaso, a north Idaho outdoorswoman who's critiqued the dredging proposal and worked hard to raise public awareness about the aesthetic and recreation values of the Blackwell Island area.

Dalsaso still has a few questions about basin maintenance and monitoring that she is pursuing but says she's "very happy about the highest levels of toxins being hauled off site."

Among the other details she's pursuing is to make sure there's an adequate sewage pump station for boats using the refashioned marina, and that there is adequate institutional memory and controls over the lesser contaminated silt, sands and gravels--some 100,000 cubic yards--that will be re-buried on the island. According to the terms of the IDEQ certification,

this lesser contaminated material will be re-buried beneath a layer of "clean imported fill."

Spokane Riverkeeper Rick Eichstaedt was likewise pleased by the revised plans for the marina, and for all the reasons that Dalsaso, Harris, and Drumheller express. One of Eichstaedt's persisting concerns about the project, as previously proposed, is that it would set a bad precedent for future such projects on the lake.

"But the way this works out, given the additional steps that the marina developer has agreed to take, my concerns about that have been resolved," Eichstaedt said. "The expense involved to do this right is considerable. For other developers who may be considering dredging projects in Lake Coeur d'Alene, this important decision will force them to meet similarly strict requirements or forego the projects."