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Plans afoot to line troubled creek

Tuesday, September 14, 2004

By ALYSSA YOUNG The Express-Times

State and federal agencies are reviewing plans to repair and line about a quarter-mile of the Bushkill Creek, including where it passes beneath Route 33.

If the permits are approved, Hercules Cement Co. and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation will fill sinkholes and install an impermeable liner along 1,400 feet of the stream bed.

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The work would begin just northwest of the Norfolk Southern Railroad bridge on the cement company's property in Stockertown and end 200 feet southeast of the Route 33 North bridge in Palmer Township.

A sinkhole damaged the bridge in January, forcing PennDOT to build a new

span that opened in June. A new southbound Route 33 bridge designed to withstand sinkholes is under construction and is expected to be complete around Thanksgiving.

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On Monday, Hercules began work to line a 550-foot section of the creek on its property upstream of the railroad bridge, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection spokesman Kurt Knaus said. It received the necessary permits last year.

Hercules also wants to line 400 feet southeast of that stretch -- even though it does not own the land -- to create a "seamless" sinkhole barrier and to prevent water from leaking into a quarry, Knaus said.

Hercules officials could not be reached for comment Monday afternoon.

PennDOT plans to line 450 feet of the creek where it runs beneath the highway.

People who live downstream from the proposed project say they fear it will create erosion problems in their back yards unless the liner continues farther.

"We're concerned that dumping all of that water into our area will create more sinkholes," Linda Ludicello said. "We've been told by professionals that that's probably what's going to happen."

Ludicello is a member of the Brookwood Group, a team of residents which has tracked about 100 sinkholes along a 1.5-mile stretch of the Bushkill Creek during the four years since one swallowed the Bushkill Street bridge that connected Stockertown and Tatamy. They got together because they wanted to help the Sarkady family seek restitution after sinkholes in their yard forced them from their home.

Ludicello said the residents plan to share their criticisms of the project during the permit's public comment period which expires Sept. 25.

"Now they're going to bring (the water) down into a neighborhood that's been riddled," she said. "If there's more damage down here, then it's up to the landowners to go into court to prove it, and it would cost us more money."

Knaus said installing the liner will not change the stream flow. The liner will stop water from leaking into the ground and therefore reduce the need for quarry dewatering, which pumps the water back into the stream, he said.

Ludicello says the project should be delayed until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes its feasibility study on the best way to repair the stream bed from Hercules to Tatamy.

"I want a lot of questions answered before that happens," she said. "As far as I'm concerned, they're putting the cart before the horse."

The \$500,000 study has begun, but it is progressing slowly because it is not fully funded, project manager Brian Mulvenna said Monday.

The Army Corps' Philadelphia district received \$80,000 for the study this year and hopes to get more money when a new fiscal year begins Oct. 1.

The Brookwood Group also will ask the Army Corps to ensure as few trees as possible are removed during the stream-lining project.

Kevin Dougherty, also a project manager with the Army Corps, said the agency will consider setting conditions such as these after reviewing the comments

from the public, including other regulatory and advisory agencies.

Hercules is responsible for obtaining permission to repair the stream bed from the people who own the land, Dougherty said.

The project will require building a small dam to stop the water from flowing into the work site, Knaus said. Hercules and PennDOT will install pumps and a pipe to divert the water around the site.

After excavating the stream bed and filling existing sinkholes, workers will lay down an impervious fabric liner and a mixture of clay and concrete deposits. Finally, they will cover the liner with the material they dug from the stream bed to restore its natural habitat.

"Once the stream lining is done, you won't be able to notice any work ever was undertaken on that section of the stream," Knaus said.

Hercules in August drilled three groundwater observation wells south and southeast of its plant to collect data that experts will use to determine the role quarry dewatering plays in the formation of widespread sinkholes.

Essroc Cement Corp. of Nazareth and Eastern Industries Inc. of Upper Nazareth Township each drilled one, and Northampton County is expected to drill a sixth well.

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