

The Capital Top Stories

Silt slips by county

Watchdogs catch muddy basin coming from pipe

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

Last week's rain sent more sediment running off the bare earth of the Annapolis Town Center construction site in Parole - right out of a pipe county officials denied was the source of previous problems.

Photographs obtained by conservation watchdogs show muddy water coming out of the pipe that is supposed to filter debris.

County officials have said the pipe wasn't responsible for previously recorded blasts of turbidity, or soiled water, recorded by sensors placed in the adjoining stream.

But stream watchers have long been saying that the site is a source of sediment in Church Creek, that county inspectors must ensure graded sites are stabilized, and that sediment regulations need to be tougher.

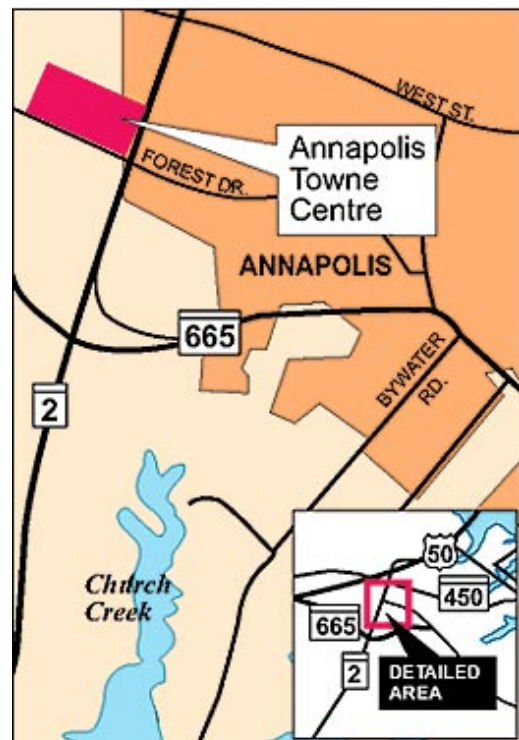
"You have a 35-acre site - the majority of it is bare dirt - sitting 100 yards from where you are monitoring," South Riverkeeper Drew Koslow said. "Now we can demonstrate the site is a source of the sediment."

He took the photograph around 3:30 p.m. on Nov. 16, shortly after the deluge that dumped 2.35 inches of rain began. A monitoring device along the creek a half mile from the site had registered only about half an inch of rain by then.



Courtesy photo

This plume of sediment began pouring out of the pipe connected to the Annapolis Town Center construction site in Parole just minutes before this picture was taken last week. About one-half inch of rain had fallen, just the beginning of the over 2-inch torrent that hit the area last Thursday.



Capital graphic

Regulations require construction sites to control the first inch of runoff. Every time it rains more than that, local streams are choked with the sediment that kills waterborne fauna and flora.

And that is if the pits, ponds, control devices and stabilization techniques work to perfection. Mr. Koslow said the system isn't working.

County officials had been at the construction site earlier in the day, noting the system meant to control sediment on the site was working.

Inspector John Peacock noted at 1 p.m. there was no water coming out of the outfall pipe at the intersection of Route 2 and Forest Drive, across the road from the construction. All systems seemed to be working.

The next day he noted it was evident the site had received rainfall "far in excess" of 1 inch, which is the state-wide mandated design capacity for sediment control devices.

The traps meant to catch and slow rainfall were filled to capacity and were discharging water right into the creek.

"They simply filled up and started overflowing," Mr. Peacock wrote in a report provided by the county.

In other words, the devices did their job.

"The site functioned as expected with that amount of rainfall," said county spokesman Pam Jordan.

Conservationists said standards aren't high enough to protect area waterways.

"Our streams are dying," Mr. Koslow said. "Our Bay is dying. Unless we change the way we do things it is going to keep on."

The Parole site has been designed to show off the latest techniques for sediment control: using chemical "flocculants" to coagulate particles so they will more easily be caught by the filters on site; and ponds with two-sections separated by a mulch-filled chamber to further filter damaging sediment.

Mr. Koslow and others have cheered the county's effort. But still the sediment rolls on.

A big problem at the Parole site is that it is not fully stabilized.

Rules require a site's bared earth to be secured by planting grass and laying down straw to keep the minute particles of soil from being washed down stream. That is supposed to be in place 14 days after bulldozers and earth movers expose the dirt.

But that hasn't happened. If a site, like Parole, is being worked constantly, stabilization is hard to accomplish, county soil conservation chief Jeff Opel admits.

" I keep saying stabilization, stabilization, stabilization, offers the best hope for sediment control," he said.

But at Parole they have been struggling to keep half of the exposed dirt stabilized.

"There has been an attempt to maintain 50 percent of it in a state of stabilization," Mr. Opel said. "Have we achieved that all the time? No."

County officials said that the day after the rain, Nov. 17, the site passed muster as part of a state inspection of county sediment and erosion control enforcement, even though the system spewed sediment-laden water down stream.

Mr. Koslow reports that was the same day he witnessed one of the largest plumes of sediment ever coming out of Church Creek into the South River.

"Until the mentality changes, that protecting water quality and water quality law is important, and those not complying will get fined ... every single time and after three times sites are shut down ... it is not going to get better," Mr. Koslow said.

"The worst thing is that the rain we need to sustain life, that is what is killing the Chesapeake. It is affecting the water because of what we do on or to, the land."

On Wednesday and into Thanksgiving Day, it rained another 1.41 inches.

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