

Could Lower Dredge Spoils Help Gardens?

SCHELLENGER'S LANDING- It's rich in nutrients, occurs naturally and something marinas are happy to rid themselves of: dredge spoils. Could dredge material be bagged and sold for gardening?

Ernest Utsch, an owner of Utsch's Marina in Lower Township, said he believes dredge spoils could become mulch and be mixed together with other materials to produce nutritious soil.

The marina owns a dredge named "Barney," which is currently in operation. A long hose runs from the dredge to a pit area on the property which is cut into cells divided by dikes.

Cape May Harbor, half of which is located in Lower Township, requires dredging to stay viable.

Utsch said when the Cape May Canal was built in 1942 as part of the World War II effort; it stopped a natural purging action.

In the 1960s, Spicer's Creek was created which also disrupted the flow of water into the harbor, he said.

Material from the dredge at Utsch's Marina comes out as six parts water and one part soil. Finer material keeps drifting through the cells while heavy material sinks in the first cell. The best fill material is close to where the pipe empties into the pit, said Utsch. The lighter material is silt which is filled with nutrients.

"I've used it personally and it's good stuff," said Utsch, noting it grew very good tomatoes.

He compared the dredge material to sediment along the Mississippi River that is sought after by farmers.

The pit at Utsch's Marina was excavated several years ago producing nearly 60,000 cubic yards of material used to cap an old dump in West Cape May.

The pit at Utsch's Marina now can be refilled with dredge spoils over a period of years.

Lower Township Economic Advisory Committee discussed dredge material at its August meeting. Committee member Rick Weber, owner of South Jersey Marina, said the belief that anything that is dredged is bad is a dangerous implication. He said there is a logjam in dredging of what to do with dredge material.

"Before we dredge, we are tested and tested and tested," he said.

The state and federal governments undertake dredging through the Army Corps of Engineers and the Intracoastal Waterway which has seen a cutback in funding, said Weber.

He said a solution needs to be found where to dispose of clay silts. He said Cape May Harbor was manmade, formerly a marsh, and if left to its own devices, it would return to marsh.

"The idea you can dig a hole in a wetland and ignore it for 100 years and think it is going to stay stable is nonsense," said Weber.

Utsch said he needed an additional permit to move his pre-tested material from his site to other locations. He said there is no funding in the federal budget for dredging of the harbor except for the Coast Guard base here and Cape May-Lewes Ferry. The harbor's main channel was dredged, he said.

Lower Township Manager Mike Voll suggested an experimental plot be planted using dredge spoils and mulch from public works to see how much growth it produces.

"We might have a whole new project for this area," he said.