

Last load of dredge material deposited at Hart-Miller

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Dundalk Eagle



Despite ardent early opposition to the project, Hart-Miller has become known as a refuge for a wide variety of birds and insects and a haven for recreational boaters. *2008 photo by Randy Leonard*

Island filled to capacity before required closure

by Randy Leonard

Last week, the final load of dredge material was off-loaded at the manmade island facility that was the center of community grief and controversy over decades and has become a destination for recreators and a renowned haven for migratory birds and rare species.

With Hart-Miller Island legally required to close at year's end midnight Thursday, contractors have been working to fill the North Cell facility.

"HMI as of [Dec. 22] has officially ceased receiving any additional dredged material," Maryland Port Administration spokesman Richard Scher wrote in an e-mail.

The island had been expected to close before the capacity of the 44-high dike walls was fully utilized, but federal stimulus funds paid for several dredging projects this summer and fall that used much of the remaining capacity, totaling about 100 million cubic yards of deposited material, according to the MPA.

The closure and the 44-foot maximum level were mandated by a 1997 law, supported by state Sen. Norman Stone (6th District).

After community members' hard-fought efforts to block the project failed in the U.S. Supreme Court, construction on a six-mile-long, 18-foot-high dike connecting the remnant Hart and Miller islands began in 1981 and continued until 1984.

Before the dike was completed, the Pleasure Island Hart-Miller Citizen's Oversight Committee was formed, mandated by state law.

The original battle against the project having been fought and lost, relatively few complaints have surfaced over the years, Stone said Tuesday.

The senator credited the committee with keeping dialogue open between the community and the MPA, which he said was "one of the reasons it ran relatively smoothly."

The facility's South Cell began receiving dredge material and a 3,000-foot beach state park was constructed along the island's northwest shore, in 1984. Dredge material from barges was mixed into a slurry and piped into settling areas. As the mix settled, water was pumped back into the harbor, monitored for chemical and physical characteristics.

The island received material from harbor dredging as well as chromium-contaminated environmental waste from the Allied Signal site in Fells Point.

Despite the unwanted aspect of the entire project and the contamination deposited there, the island gained

a positive reputation with the creation of a wildlife refuge on the South Cell, which was closed in 1990 after receiving 16.1 million cubic yards of material.

The North Cell dike was raised to 28 feet between 1988 and '89 and to its final 44-foot height between 1996 and '97.

Between 1994 and 1999, volunteers planted more than 17,000 trees and shrubs on the island. In response to beach erosion of 10 feet per year, the MPA, Baltimore County and other state agencies completed a shore restoration and protection project in 1999.

In 2002, unexploded military ammunition or explosives were found in dredge material and were safely detonated on the island. Boat traffic was restricted the following year in anticipation of the possibility of finding more ordinance, according to an Eagle article from that time.

In its annual report this month, the Dredge Material Management Committee recommended continuing discussions and planing for final development of the North Cell as a wildlife area. Monitoring of the island will continue as well.

“Just because dredged materials have stopped being shipped to Hart-Miller Island doesn't mean it is the end; it's just the beginning because now the North Cell development can begin,” longtime citizen's committee chairman Tom Kroen, a Dundalk resident, was quoted as saying in an MPA news release.

Development of the North Cell is expected to begin next year and last 10 to 15 years.

With the closing of HMI, the two facilities at Cox Creek and Masonville are expected to operate at capacity of 1.5 million cubic yards per year, and deposition will be restricted to channel maintenance dredging projects until a new facility, such as the one proposed for Coke Point, or beneficial reuse projects are implemented, according to the MPA.