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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Tug on anything at all and you'll find it connected to everything else in the universe. -- John Muir."

Mall project blamed after rainwashes silt into Shubie Canal

By RICK CONRAD Staff Reporter

The historic Shubenacadie Canal has been "ruined" by a weekend's worth of silt and sediment run-off from a massive shopping mall development and a related highway project in Dartmouth, local residents feared Monday.

"This is just a crime against nature," said Rhonda Totten, who lives near Shubie Park and is a member of Save our Shubie, a group which has been fighting against the project and trying to protect the area's waterways from contamination.

"You can actually see where it's coming into the canal," she said. "There's a brook that runs through and it is just spurting out. You can see the mud; it's going right through."

The first phase of the \$270-million Dartmouth Crossing retail and office complex is underway, while work on an interchange to connect Highway 118 to the development began last month.

Run-off from the construction overflowed containment ponds on Monday and began running into the canal, Lake Charles, Lake Micmac and Shubie Park's Grassy Brook. More than 136 millimetres of rain has fallen in the metro-Halifax area since Saturday, according to Environment Canada.

The canal was murky with sediment and other debris on Monday morning, and many grassy areas of the park near Highway 118 were flooded with mocha-coloured water. Even the ducks were taking refuge on rocks or wooden docks along the canal.

Ms. Totten wants all construction stopped immediately, a full environmental assessment done and any cleanup completed before work can resume on the two projects.

"This is a very fragile area, it's the head of a watershed where this shopping plaza is going and the area is too small and too fragile. It is not going to hold it." Environment officials were warned when the development and interchange were approved that neighbouring waterways could be affected, she said.

In fact, silt from the construction sites has seeped out at least three times already.

Rain from hurricane Ophelia caused runoff to enter the area last month and, about five months ago, contamination poured into Lake Micmac from a porous sedimentation pond near the Dartmouth Crossings shopping mall site.

"These elected officials have guardianship over this land and our waterways and ... they have a responsibility to the public and to the taxpayer and they are not owning up to that," Ms. Totten said.

An provincial environment department spokesman said Monday that an official has been at the work site 12 to 13 hours a day since Saturday, taking samples of the water and monitoring the construction firms' containment efforts.

"We're gathering data," Bill Turpin said. "There's a lot of effort focused on containment right now. We'll be looking at the next steps (today)."

But he said the department won't take any action before then, adding that the amount of rain caught staff off guard.

"I don't know that anyone anticipated this much water. But clearly, we are looking at it and we are going to be looking at the next steps. We have to look at the situation as it is now and decide what has to be done."

Two ministerial orders were issued after the earlier silt seeps, and those measures have mitigated the damage from the weekend rain, Mr. Turpin said, pointing out that officials have not seen evidence of any fish kills.

The area's municipal councillor estimated that tons of clay have already washed into Lake Micmac and the canal. He wants the province to shut down all construction immediately and to appoint an independent consultant to recommend measures to prevent any further damage and to remediate the site.

"We've been having problems with this for a year now," Coun. Andrew Younger (East Dartmouth-The Lakes) said in an interview. "It's time to get it right. We just keep getting excuses over and over again and I'm starting to get tired of them."

He said it's ironic that while governments are putting money into sprucing up the park, the province doesn't appear to be trying to protect it at the same time.

Mrs. Totten said taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for any cleanup.

"Mainly I'm worried about the fact that the canal is ruined right now. ... I have no idea how they're even going to attempt to clean this mess up."

rconrad

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