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## Suncook River plan on track

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Legislature sets aside money for infrastructure

Five years after the Suncook River jumped its banks during a massive flood in 2006, the Legislature has agreed to fund the state's plan to protect critical infrastructure, while critics still want more to be done about the effect of downstream erosion.

During a Mother's Day flood in 2006, the river moved, landing in a new channel that cuts through a sandpit in Epsom. Erosion upstream from the sandpit raised concerns about the stability of the Route 4 bridge and Black Hall Road, while downstream residents in Allenstown and Pembroke have experienced increased flooding because silt has raised the riverbed.

On Wednesday, the Senate passed a capital budget for the 2012-13 biennium that includes just over \$1 million requested by the Department of Environmental Services to build grade-control structures - typically made of concrete or rock - that would stop the headcutting slowly approaching key infrastructure. The money would also pay for a fluvial erosion study that would tell state officials where the river will move in the future.

Steve Landry, the state's Merrimack watershed supervisor, said he wasn't sure how many years it would take for headcutting to actually destabilize the Route 4 bridge or Black Hall Road, but "this is our best hope of protecting the infrastructure that's vital to our economy." Landry said construction of the grade controls is on pace to begin next year in the summer or fall.

The capital budget has been approved by both the House and Senate, though the final details may still be worked out between the two chambers before going to the governor to sign. The budget also includes \$2 million to buy floodprone homes, money that will leverage about \$6 million in federal grants, Landry said.

Landry acknowledged "there's been frustration all along" among riverside residents with the state's response to the avulsion.

The state applied four times for federal grants to address the problem to no avail, largely because most of the flood relief money in those years went to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Landry said. Only last year did DES officials decide to seek state money to

address the problem.

"The state of New Hampshire is taking some responsibility to assume some ownership here and do something proactive for their constituents," Landry said. "I think it's great."

Earlier this year, a group of lawmakers criticized the DES plan as not being sufficient to address the sediment migration and buildup downstream caused by the sandpit. The legislators, led by Rep. Brandon Giuda of Chichester, introduced a plan seeking up to \$6 million to either reroute the river into its original path or pursue an option to shore up the sandpit as determined by a \$50,000 engineering study. The bill, which was not voted on by the full House, also sought \$1 million to dredge the river downstream.

Giuda said this week he is pleased to see the DES money approved for grade controls to protect infrastructure, but he doesn't view the funding as a victory because "everybody wanted it." Giuda said he has cooled on the idea of rerouting the river at the advice of engineers who favor other approaches, but he is still trying to secure money for a study of sediment migration in the river.

"Nothing they're doing affects the sediment migration downstream," he said of the DES's plan.

Landry said public perception that the agency hasn't done enough about the sediment buildup "is certainly understandable." DES officials have said that attempting to move or dredge the river would be too costly to justify uncertain results.

"Our agency's made it clear in that we're not trying to fool anybody here," Landry said. "Is the sediment transport going to stop? No, because that channel's still going through an old sandpit."

However, Landry said the plan addresses the state's most critical concern by ensuring the stability of a major east-west corridor in Route 4. Given drastic budget cuts for the 2012-13 biennium, Landry said the department is glad its proposal went through.

"We all recognized it was one of the worst times to be asking for this kind of appropriation, but I think our decision makers in Concord realized there was a lot of frustration that nothing visible had happened since the avulsion occurred," Landry said.

As for the \$2 million budgeted for buying floodprone homes, Allenstown police Chief Shaun Mulholland said 27 homes in Allenstown may qualify to be purchased. Since the flood, 23 floodprone homes in Allenstown have been bought up, and Mulholland is awaiting response from another nine homeowners who qualify.

Also in the approved capital budget, Landry noted, is \$200,000 for the removal of the Buck Street Dam. Removing the dam could release some of the sediment buildup and make the Suncook act more like a river instead of a "series of impoundments," he said.

Mulholland said approval of the budget items is "an important step" in shoring up the problems caused by the Suncook avulsion.

"It's not the end of the problem by any means. . . . I'm not sure there will ever be a complete resolution of the problem, but it's an important step," he said.

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