

State extends public comment period for Toms River Superfund settlement



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TOMS RIVER -- The state has extended the comment period to April 5 on a controversial settlement proposal with BASF that would preserve 1,000 acres of the former Ciba-Geigy Corp. Superfund site.

The extension marks a win for environmental advocates and township officials who have criticized the state Department of Environmental Protection for not involving Toms River in the settlement discussions. Advocates, including Save Barnegat Bay, are now pushing the state to hold a public hearing on the plan in Toms River.

"While it is fantastic news that the NJDEP has extended the public comment period for their proposed settlement with BASF, the current owners of the Ciba-Geigy Superfund site, there are still so many questions that need to be answered if we hope to make informed comments about this proposal," Save Barnegat Bay wrote in a statement on its Facebook page.

More: Residents pan NJ plans for Toms River Superfund site, want more input

The group is urging people to sign a change.org petition which asks the DEP to hold a public hearing on the settlement in Toms River. "The Toms River community demands that BASF and NJDEP hold a public meeting at the Toms River HS before the end of the comment period regarding the proposed (Natural Resources Defense) settlement and that knowledgeable representatives from BASF and NJDEP be in attendance to answer our questions," the petition reads.

The DEP announced the comment period extension following a three-hour "Community Speak-Out" on the settlement proposal held by Save Barnegat Bay last week at Toms River High School North. Dozens of speakers raised questions about the settlement agreement, which would resolve a 2007 lawsuit filed by the state that accused Ciba of damaging New Jersey's natural resources.

Toms River officials have opposed the settlement, noting it would allow BASF to develop 250 acres of the property. The township wants all the land to be preserved, and wants the

company to set aside some money to compensate residents for any future health concerns that could be related to Ciba's decades of industrial dye production on the land.

Liquid waste from Ciba's operations was initially dumped in the nearby Toms River, but eventually it was piped into the ocean off Ortley Beach through a 10-mile-long pipeline.

A rupture in that pipeline at Bay and Vaughn avenues in 1984 alerted residents to the chemicals that were being dumped into the ocean. Ciba employees had for years also dumped chemical waste in various pits on the property; sometimes first putting the waste and sludge into drums that were placed mostly in unlined landfills.

Thousands of drums were eventually moved from the nearly 1,400-acre site, located between Oak Ridge Parkway and Route 37. Hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of tainted soil were dug up, treated to remove contaminants, and returned to the site.

Toms River also wants a planned nature center on the property to include the history of Ciba's environmental contamination, and wants BASF to set aside money in a fund to pay for any future health problems that might be attributed to pollution from the property. Seaside Park Mayor John Peterson supported the township's position in a letter sent last week to DEP, saying he objected to Toms River officials' exclusion from settlement talks.

In recent years, BASF has been hosting students from local high schools — including Toms River Regional schools — who have assisted with environmental studies and learned about the property's history and remediation efforts.

Groundwater cleanup — paid for by BASF — is still ongoing at the property. Before selling the land, Ciba spent more than \$300 million to treat groundwater and clean up toxic waste on its property, and spent millions more to settle three lawsuits related to toxic waste on its land and the polluted groundwater that it caused.

Rabbit rescue: Toms River Animal Shelter seeks supplies for rescued rabbits

It will likely take at least 20 more years to clean up the groundwater pollution plume that emanates from the Superfund site, officials have said.

Comments can be submitted to David Bean, Chief, Office of Natural Resource Restoration, NJDEP, 501 East State Street, Mail Code 501-03, PO Box 420, Trenton, NJ 08625-0420.

Jean Mikle covers Toms River and several other Ocean County towns, and has been writing about local government and politics at the Jersey Shore for nearly 38 years. She's

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