

## **New Bedford, Massachusetts**

By Lenny Siegel  
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On September 28, 2006, I visited New Bedford, Massachusetts. My principal host was John “Buddy” Andrade, of the Old Bedford Village Community Development Corporation. One of the oldest European settlements in the United States, New Bedford originally gained renown as home to whaling fleets. Later, its textile mills played a major part in the American industrial revolution. Today it is the number one fishing port in the continental United States.

New Bedford does not appear economically depressed, but the area around the historic harbor is underdeveloped. There are numerous old brick industrial buildings, as well as vacant land where such buildings formerly stood. New Bedford, with about 100,000 people today, has for centuries been home to people of Portuguese and Cape Verdean descent, and now it has growing Mexican and Guatemalan communities.



**An abandoned textile mill across from the New Bedford Harbor Superfund staging area**

New Bedford’s largest environmental problem is polluted harbor sediment. One of the nation’s Superfund “mega-sites,” the 18,000-acre harbor’s sediment contains high concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in several areas. Though there were many sources, the largest appears to have been Aerovox, a manufacturer of electrical capacitors and transformers, which operated on the harbor’s edge from about 1940 to 1977. There are supposed to be signs along the waterfront warning people not to eat fish, but they often disappear and must be replaced.

EPA placed New Bedford Harbor on the “Superfund” National Priorities List in 1983. In 1990, it proposed a remedy that included incineration of PCB-laden waste. Public outcry, led by local groups such as Hands Across the River, blocked that proposal. In the late 1990’s EPA approve a substitute remedy. Today sediment is dredged, de-sanded, de-watered, and shipped to a license PCB-landfill in Michigan.



**The dredge is towed by cables from the shore**

The Army Corps of Engineers, under contract to U.S. EPA, started dredging harbor hotspots as early as 1994. This year, the Corps is in its third year of full-scale dredging. Over 40 days, it expects to remove 25,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment, treat 20-million gallons of water, and ship 16,000 tons of residue by train to Michigan.

There is consensus support for the remedy, but community members express serious concern at the anticipated duration of the project. At the current rate, dredging will continue for an estimated 26 years. The problem isn't capacity or weather, but money.

Over the life of the project, EPA has spent over \$220 million for "planning, engineering, and construction" at New Bedford Harbor. Reportedly, over \$100 million has come from private responsible parties. However, the remaining funding—about \$300 million more—will have to come from EPA's depleted Superfund. Without the Superfund tax on chemical production, that fund is entirely dependent upon Congressional appropriations. At \$15 million per year, the project proceeds slowly and suffers significant inefficiencies from the imposed short dredging season. (EPA's complete description of the New Bedford Harbor Superfund Site can be found at <http://www.epa.gov/nc/nbh>.)

Activists are concerned about continuing public exposures to PCBs through water, air, and food chain pathways. They would like subsistence fishing to resume safely. And they point out that as long as the harbor is contaminated, comprehensive redevelopment will be difficult in New Bedford and other shoreline communities. On the other hand, while the painfully slow cleanup remains unacceptable, it may give local community groups the time they need to develop strategies to resist the gentrification pressures that will inevitably rise when this stretch of historic New England waterfront is once again deemed healthy.



**Dewatering facility, with empty train cars on left**

In my brief tour of New Bedford, I saw numerous brownfields in various stages of redevelopment, including greenhouses, senior housing, and a parking lot for the “fast ferry” to the island of Martha’s Vineyard. I describe four:

### **Keith Middle School**

Landscapers and environmental crews are just about the only people on the new, \$69 million campus of Keith Middle School. Built on a former dump site containing PCBs and other contaminants—presumably from the same companies that polluted the harbor—the school did not open as scheduled this Fall. Local officials were aware that the site had been used for dumping, but limited sampling showed moderate contamination.

A consultant said that the property could be made safe for \$5 million, by capping the contamination in place. Fortunately, a bulldozer tore a hole in the cap in early August, demonstrating that the cap was not as robust as designed. Even if the August release were contained, the incident suggested the students and teachers might be exposed in the future.

While environmental regulators and city and school officials consider whether the school will ever be opened, no one seems to be investigating potential downgradient contamination. A public housing project lies downhill from the school site.



### **Keith Middle School**

For a series of recent news reports on the Keith School situation, see <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/08-06/08-08-06/02topstories.htm>.

### **Morse Cutting Tools**

Morse Cutting Tools produced precision cutting tools on a two-block area in New Bedford from the late 1900s until 1987. Its multi-story brick buildings were demolished in 1997, but a mix of contamination, including oil and volatile organic compounds, remains underground. In that year, Congressman Barney Frank requested that the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR) conduct a public health assessment. See [http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/PHA/morsecutting/mct\\_p1.html](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/PHA/morsecutting/mct_p1.html). ATSDR, as is its custom, conducted no sampling of its own, but it reported, “Results indicated that the levels of cis-1,2-dichloroethene, trichloroethene, vinyl chloride, barium, cadmium, chromium, lead, and silver exceeded health-based comparison values” in off-site groundwater.



### **Morse Cutting Tools' soil vapor extraction system**

ATSDR reported offsite TCE and vinyl chloride contamination at levels suggesting a potential *vapor intrusion* problem, but it downplayed indoor air concerns. It based its findings upon limited indoor air sampling—conducted before protocols for such investigations were well established—but it recommended “that indoor air concentrations be periodically monitored to ensure groundwater contaminants are not volatilizing into the air in nearby residences.”

Meanwhile, a soil vapor extraction system constantly extracts volatile contaminants from the property.

### **Palmer’s Cove**

Just north of the stone hurricane barrier that guards the New Bedford Harbor sits Palmer’s Island and Palmer’s Cove. A patch of contaminated land, used for recreation in the 1970s, lies between the harbor and the John F. Kennedy Memorial Highway. A pedestrian overpass links the land, and potentially the waterfront, with the adjacent neighborhood.



**Palmer’s Cove open space**

Reportedly, the city of New Bedford highlighted the area in its successful application for Brownfields Showcase Community status. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts developed a plan for revitalizing the area with recreational facilities and public open space, including a boardwalk linking Palmer’s Island with the mainland. But instead the city encouraged the construction of fish processing plants. The new mayor, who once played baseball on the site, has agreed to build a new diamond near the highway, but the rest of the plan remains unconsummated.

According to Buddy, Cape Verdeans and other people of color in the neighborhood want full restoration of the remaining open space. He points out that the New Bedford Harbor Trustee Council has funded parks in other neighborhoods near the

harbor, but not in this area. The Trustee Council has dispensed millions of dollars assessed for Natural Resource Damage (NRD) at the Superfund site, and it has yet to announce grantees for its 2005 round of applications. However, advocates of the Palmer's Cove project learned of the request for proposals too late in the game, so they did not submit a proposal.



**Palmer's Island with historic lighthouse just left of center**

Perhaps because Natural Resource Damage Assessments are still the exception at Superfund sites, they usually lack vehicles for public involvement. In 2004, I gave a talk at a national conference on Cooperative Assessment, suggesting that major NRD projects establish community advisory groups. (See <http://www.cpeo.org/pubs/PublicNRD.doc>.) Such continuing community involvement would allow the Trustee Council to develop programs that take into account local community interest, as well as help community groups develop proposals that fit the Trustees' priorities.

### **Nashawena Mills**

The former office and powerplant building for the Nashawena textile mills sits on the western shore of New Bedford Harbor. The building's owner has restored the office structure's wooden interior. The Coalition for Buzzards Bay, an environmental organization serving the entire Buzzards Bay watershed, leases space there and hopes to eventually buy the building. The boiler-room and smokestack have been abandoned in place, but the turbines have been removed from the vacuous, ceramic-tile-lined generator room. A basketball half-court covers much of the floor. I don't believe that there is a long-term plan for the non-office portion of the building, and during my brief visit I learned nothing about any potential contamination on site.



**Beneficial reuse of the Nashawena Mills generator room**

New Bedford is recuperating from deindustrialization and the contamination left by more than a century of industrial activity, but revitalization is being held back by the depletion of the national Superfund. While it's important that money be made available faster, the city and its residents can take advantage of the current situation by developing a comprehensive approach to revitalization that emphasizes equity, preservation of New Bedford's historical communities, and additional removal or treatment of environmental hazards.