

Hearings on PCB dredging resume

■ A hearing will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Marist College in Poughkeepsie. 1/22/01

By MICHAEL McCAGG
Freeman staff

PUBLIC HEARINGS on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's proposal to have the General Electric Co. dredge PCBs from sections of the upper Hudson River resume Tuesday in the same place they left off last month — Poughkeepsie.

The hearings resume as environmental groups rail against the EPA's two-month extension of the public comment period on the \$460 million river cleanup plan.

The EPA announced last month its plan to dredge the river to remove the PCBs. The oily amber chemical, polychlorinated biphenyls, were widely used by GE and others in industry in part because they were so indestructible and because they were excellent insulating materials in electrical components. They were later linked to cancer in humans and to various problems in wildlife, and were banned in 1977. But by then, 1.1 million pounds or more of PCBs had leaked or had been dumped under state permit into the river.

The EPA said in its dredging proposal last month that because of PCBs' durability

See Hearings, page A6

Hearings on PCB dredging to resume on Tuesday

Continued from page A1

and toxicity, and the conclusion that weathered PCBs were moving within the river system and in the sediment, the only responsible recourse was a targeted dredging plan.

The agency proposed removing an estimated 100,000 pounds of PCBs at a projected cost to GE of \$460 million, plus another \$30 million that would be spent on continued cleanup at factory sites. A final order on the cleanup plan is expected in June, after the public comment period.

The first public hearing on the proposal since a Dec. 15 hearing at the Sheraton Civic Center will be conducted at Marist College on Tuesday.

The hearing is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. at the Nelly Goletti Theater in the student center.

Other hearings — including a Feb. 6 meeting will be held at the Albany Marriott on Wolf Road in Colonie — will follow. Hearings are also slated for New York City and Hudson Falls,

said Alison Hess, an EPA spokeswoman.

The first two public hearings on the proposal — a third hearing was conducted last month in Saratoga Springs — have drawn an estimated combined crowd of 1,400 people who have largely been in favor of the controversial dredging plan.

EPA officials estimated that the crowd at Saratoga Springs hearing on Dec. 12 was evenly split on the issue, though environmentalists said that the plan won the support of those speaking at the hearing by a 2-1 margin.

Meanwhile, the approximately 80 speakers at the Poughkeepsie hearing last month were almost unanimous in their support of the dredging plan.

Hess declined to say what the public's overall opinion had been in letters and e-mails the agency received. She said that comments were flooding the agency and that no one there had stopped to count the number of comments yet.

"We did expect, from the high degree of public interest, to get

a lot of public comments mailed and e-mailed ... — and have," she said.

In light of that and because six requests for an extension including one from GE, which has ardently opposes the dredging proposal — the agency on Thursday extended the comment period's closing from Feb. 18 to mid-April.

Environmental groups in Albany and Poughkeepsie blasted the extension decision.

"We are all for public input and public comment, but unfortunately we see this request as primarily a delay factor," said Rick Schiavo of Poughkeepsie-based Scenic Hudson. "The more we delay the final decision the more people are at risk from PCBs in the Hudson Valley."

Jeff Jones, communications director for Albany-area environmental group Environmental Advocates, said the delay threatens the entire cleanup plan.

"It allows GE time to bring political pressure on the Bush administration to reject the EPA proposal," he said.