

Morning Sentinel

Skowhegan

April 11, 2013

Town takes precautions against erosion at North Cemetery

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SKOWHEGAN — The predicted rain, sleet and snow is not expected to further erode a cemetery embankment where several graves could be exposed if the collapse continues.

Even so, town officials are not taking any chances.

About 200 feet of fabric silt fencing was installed Thursday morning around the lower portion of the embankment that collapsed on the west side of North Cemetery, off Madison Avenue. Sand, clay and soil from the collapse also has fallen into nearby Whitten Brook, an environmentally sensitive area.

Inspectors from an engineering firm are expected to be at the site this afternoon to see what is needed to prevent erosion, Road Commissioner Greg Dore said Thursday.

Five burial sites belonging to the Savage family are within about 8 feet of the erosion, and the problem will get worse if not dealt with immediately, town officials said. Grave markers closest to the collapsing embankment are from the families of George A. Savage, who died in 1944; and Roy E. Savage, a member of the U.S. cavalry in the Spanish-American War at age 18, who died in 1969.

Whitten Brook is one of a few urban wild brook trout streams in the state and is considered to be an “urban impaired” stream, according to a study begun in December 2010. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency wants to use Whitten Brook as a pilot project for small urban streams in the state and around New England.

Dore said people from Acorn Engineering of Portland, the firm doing the Whitten Brook watershed restoration project, are expected to arrive about 4:30 p.m. today, Dore said

“That blowout isn’t from surface water; it’s ground water,” Dore said Thursday. “My thoughts are the reason that happened is because the ground was frozen and so, underneath there, the water built up and couldn’t get out because the ground was frozen. Then the frost let go.”

Dore said engineers will analyze the soil to figure out what caused the collapse and how to correct it.

Dore also met Thursday in an unrelated meeting with organizers of the Whitten Brook restoration project, including Jennifer Jespersen, project manager with FB Environmental Associates Inc. of Portland, and Jeff Dennis, a biologist with the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Skowhegan selectmen last April accepted \$88,649 in grant money from the Maine DEP for the Whitten Brook project and another round of grants applications is coming this year.

Dennis said engineers will be asked to determine how to minimize the instability of the slope, because the area has eroded previously. He said the sediment that has leached from the hill already has wiped out the habitat of ground creatures along the brook shore.

“It’s obviously not a good thing,” Dennis said after the meeting. “It would be nice if it didn’t happen again. Can the stream recover from it? Yes, but it would be nice if it didn’t happen again next year and the year after.”

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