

Well equipped for inexpensive water

■ WELLS

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Already, Boston officials have identified other private wells in East Boston and the Back Bay.

The City Council voted Wednesday to investigate the health and safety of well-drilling in Boston, and also the financial implications for the MWRA. "It's an issue that two months ago I'd have called an anecdote, and is fast becoming a trend," said Robert Ciolek, executive director of the Boston Water and Sewer Commission after the Council vote.

"It's good for Roger Berkowitz, but it's bad for the city," said City Councilor David Scondras (Fenway), who will head the investigation. "Everyone else will have to pay for his share of the harbor cleanup. I want water bills to go down. What he's doing will make them go up."

Berkowitz sees the well issue as a simple business equation: "If one source is really tight, you look for another source. Water rates are virtually going out of control. We use a lot of water. At a seafood processing plant, it's the chief means of sanitizing the fish.

"We've put in a number of holding tanks and I'd like to see a two-year payback," he said. If confronted by the city over the well, he said, "I'd question the constitutionality of giving it up, because the quality is better than what I'm getting from the city and we have the land rights."

And, he said, he will be paying full sewer charges to the city to discharge the water pumped out of his own well.

City officials believe Legal Seafoods' well is deep enough to avoid draining much-needed ground water from land under Allston. That may not be the case for a well drilled for the Fairfield Coin-Op laundromat in Back Bay.

Scondras received complaints from owners of a condominium behind the laundromat that a loss of ground water could allow a fungus to eat away at the wooden foundations of the aging structure.

It is unclear how many other wells have been, or are being, drilled in Boston. David Haynes, president of Northeast Water Wells Inc. in Hudson, N.H., the company that built Legal Seafoods' well, said Bos-

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ton is opening up as a source of well business.

"I'm working with a customer in East Boston now," Haynes said. "We're getting more inquiries and more bid work in Boston than ever before."

"Wells make sense in the long run," he added. "Once you recoup your up-front costs, the rest of it is gravy - until they decide to tax it or something."

Policymakers seem less interested in taxing wells than in bringing down the cost of MWRA water so that fewer customers will be tempted to build wells. Otherwise, they say, rich companies like Legal Seafoods will happily avail themselves of the well option, while homeowners will be stuck with more than \$5 bil-

lion in harbor cleanup expenses.

"Legal Seafoods is a highly successful restaurant and certainly they have the financial ability to do things to reduce their water rate," said MWRA spokesman Paul DiNatale. "Our concern is getting more state and federal assistance to keep the water and sewer rates down."

Councilor at Large John Nucci said, "If rates don't go down, I'm sure those businesses with the resources to do it will explore digging wells. If we don't regulate them, downtown Boston will look like the surface of the moon."

Scondras suggested a different approach. "If there's so much water down there," he quipped, "maybe the City of Boston should dig a giant well, so everybody can use it."