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More urgency on reef cleanup

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It's a project that has been stalled for years over a range of issues -- who's in charge, who's paying and how much, what's the best way to do the actual work.

But the remediation of Randle Reef must be a high priority for all levels of government.

Millions of dollars have been spent to clean up Hamilton Harbour and reconnect us with our waterfront through Bayfront and Pier 4 parks. We want the waterfront to be a people place. But Randle Reef holds Canada's second-largest deposit of toxic coal tar, after the Sydney Tar Ponds in Nova Scotia. That is a huge impediment to our city reaching its objectives around waterfront reclamation.

So it's good news there has been a modest but highly important step forward on the issue of Randle Reef. The Hamilton Port Authority has submitted the Randle Reef containment design to the federal government for approval.

The Port Authority's application, under the Navigable Waters Protection Act to the Minister of Transport, includes the site and engineering plans for the structure to contain the contamination.

The plan is, essentially, to build a containment structure around the worst sediment, then add less-contaminated mud from other areas of the harbour. It would then be capped to create a shipping pier. The work needs to be done to stop the contamination from spreading.

The reef, a shallow area next to U.S. Steel's Hamilton Works, is heavily contaminated toxic coal tar. It has negative effects on fish and other wildlife. It's the largest chemical deposit in the Great Lakes. Capping and containing the mess is essential to the city's aim of getting Hamilton Harbour off the International Joint Commissions' list of Great Lakes pollution hot spots.

While the Port Authority's application is a good thing, the financing for the plan remains up in the air. Both the federal and provincial governments have allotted \$30 million each for Randle Reef. Delays have pushed the project's cost up to about \$105 million from \$90 million three years ago. The Port Authority has committed \$6 million and U.S. Steel will contribute \$7 million.

About \$5 million toward the project was included in Hamilton's 2009 water and waste water budget. There is the potential to save as much as \$5 million on steel piling, which has seen a drop in price over

the past few years. But there hasn't been a financial commitment from Halton Region and any consideration of such a contribution won't happen before next month's municipal election.

This clean-up plan is a crucial one for the welfare of our community. For one thing, delisting the harbour as a hot spot is expected to bring in more than \$1 billion of tangible economic benefits. Beyond that, is our city's image -- both internally and externally -- as a pollution centre. Cleaning up Randle Reef is an environmental and community priority and it should be a high priority for all of us.