

## Digging for answers

# School went up during era of little regulation

■ When Southside High was built in late '70s, environmental laws were lax.

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As the investigation begins at Southside High School and its possible link to students with cancer, one fundamental question stands out: Why did the Elmira City School District decide in 1977 to build a new high school on a former industrial site?

Soil tests conducted in 1977 showed "relatively widespread contamination by a refined petroleum product" 15 to 20 feet below ground, topped by 4 to 10 feet of cinders, brick, concrete, wood, coal and remnants of other "unsuitable fill," according to the firm that did the study.

That company, Empire Soils Investigations Inc., recommended in its report that the entire future school property be excavated about 10 feet below the ground to remove the fill, buried structures and utilities.

However, it's unclear whether the architect or contractors removed any or all of the miscellaneous fill before beginning construction.

So why weren't officials deterred from using this particular site on Elmira's Southside?

They didn't know better at the time, said Tony LaSorte Jr., health and safety hygienist for Schuyler-Chemung-Tioga Board of Coopera-

tive Educational Services.

In 1977, when Empire Soils drilled 40-foot-deep wells at 16 spots on the future Southside High campus, there were no laws requiring builders to check or clean up those wastes, LaSorte said Friday.

The soil testing done at the time was conducted for construction soundness purposes only — not to evaluate environmental data.

"Today, red flags would be flying all over the place," LaSorte said. "It's a former industrial site."

In 1977, the school district purchased the South Main Street property from the Chemung County Industrial Development Agency for \$80,000.

The school was built on 31 acres of an original 83-acre industrial site, partly in the city, partly in Southport. Manufacturing operations continued on the adjacent property through 1985.

Since 1887, the industrial site has been home to factories such as Remington Rand and American LaFrance. The factories on the property built everything from typewriters and high-speed steam engines to Norden bomb sights and calculators.

Empire Soils said in its 1977 report that the decision to leave the top layers of "unsuitable fill" and "buried structures" and to simply add clean fill could result in "serious cracking of the floor slabs."

Such cracking would allow ground elements to damage the foundation, the report said.

It's likely that some fill was

removed, but there are no known records to prove it, LaSorte said Friday.

The architect who designed the school — Fanning-Howey of Celina, Ohio — was allowed to remove and dump the fill without recording any information about what was removed, how much was removed or where it was taken, LaSorte said.

Rocks and rubble, which might have been contaminated by petroleum, could have been dumped anywhere, LaSorte said, because there were no laws regulating the testing and removal of the soil.

The lead architect on the 1978 project, Ronald Fanning, could not be reached for comment Friday. But another architect at the Ohio firm said that today it is required to do environmental impact studies.

"We draft an environmental report and send it off to the state," said Mark Ranyak, an architect who specializes in school construction.

That's because in 1980, Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, commonly referred to as Superfund. The law created a tax on chemical and petroleum industries, and gave the federal government jurisdiction to enforce penalties against companies that release hazardous waste.

The law didn't really take hold until the passing of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act in 1986, which addressed administration of the previous law.

"We look at environmental issues differently now," LaSorte said.

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