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Southside: New probe to look for chemicals in the soil

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Latest in a wave of tests

Scott Rodabaugh, an environmental engineer with the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said the conservation department never had any reason to believe there was metal contamination at the school.

"When that high school was built, a lot of soil was dug up and brought in," he said. "But we want to be sure. We want to provide people with definitive answers."

For the same reason, the conservation department conducted a second round of air and water fountain tests inside the school last week to be sure students and teachers aren't breathing or drinking anything dangerous.

Parents and City Council members recently asked the Elmira school board to investigate a reported 13 cases of cancer among students who have attended the school since 1997. School officials, in turn, asked county health officials to get involved in the investigation.

Previous air tests conducted in 1997 found only trace amounts of chemicals.

Tests conducted between 1996 and 1998 in and around the high school focused on oil contamination. They were performed only after someone reported seeing an oil sheen on nearby Miller's Pond in 1995.

Conservation department officials investigated the report expecting to find that someone had dumped a can of motor oil or had buried a drum of oil near the pond, Rodabaugh said.

But that wasn't the case. Engineers traced the source of the petroleum to the grounds of Southside High, Rodabaugh said.

Petroleum in the groundwater at sites around the school building is

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Scott Rodabaugh, environmental engineer, state Department of Environmental Conservation



not significant enough to pose a health hazard, Rodabaugh said. But there are a few spots where engineers found pure fuel oil in monitoring wells they had installed.

Rodabaugh said most petroleum contamination in the soil is underground, but any surface contamination can be easily avoided because it is visible: "If the soil looks clean, it is," he said.

Radar hunts for oil tanks

A 1931 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map pictured five to seven petroleum tanks buried where the school's gymnasium and swimming pool currently are, Rodabaugh said.

"The oil probably came from those tanks that leaked," Rodabaugh said. "I don't know when they were removed, or who removed them."

On April 19, conservation department engineers confirmed that fact by using radar to "see" into the ground below the gymnasium floor and pool area bleachers, Rodabaugh said.

The radar reached 10 feet below ground and no tanks were found, he said.

The tops of storage tanks are usually found 3 to 5 feet below ground level so the radar would most likely have picked up some part of the tanks if they were there, Rodabaugh said.

The pattern of oil seepage indicates there probably also was some kind of oil storage facility on the north end of the football field, he said. That tank also is gone now.

Based on the concentrations and low volatility of the dissolved petroleum samples collected, Rodabaugh said the tanks were probably removed decades ago, possibly years before the school was built. But the fuel oil is so degraded that it cannot easily dissolve in water or air.

Residents who live near Miller's Pond said they remembered seeing evidence of the oil contamination in the water decades before it was officially reported in 1995.

Bob Schneider grew up on Junction Street and said he "lived at Miller Pond" as a child, catching frogs, turtles and fish for fun. But in 1950, "all of a sudden, hundreds of big fish — some of them a foot and a half long — were lying around dead, and oil was oozing out of the bank at the southwest end of the pond," he said.

The old tanks might have corroded away and caused contamination long ago, said Tony LaSorte Jr., a health and safety hygienist for the Schuyler-Chemung-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

Tanks buried in 1930 were not protected in rustproof or protected containers, as they are today, LaSorte said.

What happened to the tanks could remain a mystery because no

one was required to document removals of such tanks until after 1985, Rodabaugh said.

Cleanup set to begin

Regardless of the tanks' whereabouts, officials know where the petroleum is and intend to clean it up.

Beginning the week of May 8, conservation department officials will begin pumping oxygen into the soil and water at the school and surrounding properties to activate organisms that will break down the petroleum contaminants into carbon dioxide and water, Rodabaugh said. This process is expected to last two to three months, he said.

"This is essentially a process that has been occurring naturally for decades," the environmental engineer said. "It's going to clean itself up. It would probably would have taken a few more decades without modern technology. This will just help Mother Nature help herself."

"If we did nothing down there, it's not a health problem," Rodabaugh said. "This is an environmental problem because the petroleum is in the groundwater. We don't think it's related to cancer concerns."

The conservation department has made special efforts to address the petroleum problem quickly to help alleviate concerns of Southside residents, Rodabaugh said.

He said he plans to send a letter to residents in the neighborhoods around Willys and Morrow streets to explain the oil cleanup. Included with the letter is a map with a large, outlined area representing the plume of oil contamination. The area encompasses Southside High west to Miller's Pond, and the former American LaFrance site north to property owned by New York State Electric & Gas Corp.

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