

### Parents: Questions linger

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"We weren't too concerned with the air," said Julie Patros, a parent of a former Southside student who has cancer. "We're more concerned with the soil samples. I'm glad that everything shows the air's OK. We're not really going to do anything formally until we hear back from some people."

Patros, a founder of the Southside Elmira Environmental Action League, a grass roots group monitoring the state investigation, said she intends to send a copy of the air tests to a toxicologist with a national environmental group for a second opinion.

She said she is also anxious to hear what Craig Slater, an environmental attorney hired by the city, has to say regarding the air test results.

"The more opinions, the better," Patros said.

Timothy Tobin, the father of

Michael Tobin, a Junior at Southside who has cancer, said he wanted to withhold comment, for now, about the test results. "I need to take some time and read and try to translate what it means," he said.

Walton said that the complicated nature of the testing is problematic for her family.

"We want to be able to know that this can be trusted," Walton said. "We're growing up in an age where the government can't be trusted. I'm not going to be the first one to jump in and say, 'OK, it's safe.'"

Jack Keefe, a former Elmira City Council member who has grandchildren at Southside, said he would have more faith in the tests if they had closed the school for two weeks, kept everyone out and then sampled the air.

"That seems the best way to get a good solid reading," Keefe said. "I'd feel much more comfortable if they did it that way."

Keefe said that he would accept the state's results because he was not an expert in the field and said he was "very thankful ... that there is no contamination."

The community, including local health and school officials, still awaits results from July 20 air sample tests and from soil samples taken on the school grounds, as well as an evaluation from the state health department on the occurrence of cancer among current and former students.

"I'm anxiously awaiting the soil samples and getting impatient for the results," said Thomas Kump, who is both director of environmental health for Chemung County and president of the Elmira school board.

Officials from the state Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Conservation expect to present their findings during a public meeting in mid-August. No date has been set for the meeting.

### Tests: Air is clear at Southside

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McDonald would not disclose what chemicals were detected in the soil or what contaminants were tested for in the additional air samples.

Test results on those air and soil samples are expected to be released in August, the report said.

The state also recommended that the Elmira school district examine its heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems to increase the amount of outside air being circulated throughout the school at 777 S. Main St.

Outside air helps reduce the amount of stagnant body odors, perfumes and cleaning solvents in indoor air, said Tony LaSorte, a health and safety hygienist for the Schuyler-Chemung Triops Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation tested 11 air samples collected on May 22 and 23 from several sites inside the school, including three samples from beneath the concrete slab on which the school was built.

The state also collected three samples from Elmira Free Academy to serve as a basis for comparison. The air was safe there as well, the report said.

The engineers took samples in an area contaminated by fuel oil. That fuel oil may have come from petroleum storage tanks that were buried underground when the property was an industrial site, although those tanks are no longer there, the report stated.

"My opinion is that there are no vapors from the petroleum being drawn into the school," McDonald said.

Samples were collected from just below the concrete foundation in the pool filter room, the boiler room and the gymnasium storage room under the pool bleachers. These samples showed slightly

elevated levels of Freon and chlorinated solvents but did not show high concentrations of petroleum-related compounds, the report stated.

The Department of Environmental Conservation traced a plume of petroleum contamination from an oil slick on Miller Pond, which is near the school. State engineers are injecting oxygen into the ground to set up the fuel oil, which is about 15 feet underground.

No hazardous fumes from the petroleum are reaching the surface, the report stated.

The Freon compounds do not pose any health threat, LaSorte said.

"Freons are toxic when you get up to levels of 10,000 million parts per billion," LaSorte said.

Even then, a person must be exposed to the compound for eight hours a day for a long period of time, he said.

The highest underground level of Freon was recorded at 330 parts per billion and inside the school the highest level of Freon was only 1.7 parts per billion.

Imagine a purple marble in a pile of 1 billion white marbles. That's what one part per billion means, LaSorte said.

Until recently, some kinds of Freon were commonly used as coolants in air conditioners and as ingredients in aerosol sprays and cleaning solvents, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The school district stopped using Freon in its air-conditioning system at least five years ago, after scientists realized it was damaging the

ozone layer, LaSorte said. Its use in air-conditioning systems is not considered a health risk, but Freon is regulated because of its impact on the atmosphere, according to the EPA.

The chlorinated solvent compounds, such as chloroform, are used to make other chemicals and can also be formed in small amounts when chlorine is added to water, according to the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry.

Chloroform and other chlorinated solvents are commonly found when chlorinated swimming pool water evaporates. The highest levels of chloroform were found under the foundation in the school's pool filter room at levels about 225 times what is acceptable in normal air.

"These are typically associated with byproducts of chlorine used in swimming pools," Kump said. "I imagine that if similar tests were done at other pool locations, they would find similar compounds."

McDonald said the school district should examine the mechanical equipment around the swimming pool and the air-conditioning pipes that may be leaking and causing the elevated levels of contaminants in the soil gas.

"They shouldn't ignore it," McDonald said.

LaSorte said the school would address the concerns raised in the report.

The engineers also sampled air in an outdoor courtyard northwest of the school's gymnasium. Nothing unusual was reported in those samples, the report stated.

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