

School: Can state ease parents' fears?

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Thomas Kump, who is both director of environmental health for Chemung County and president of the Elmira school board.

Kump stressed that it is important for residents to have realistic expectations of what can be answered at the meeting.

"If people are expecting to find out what's causing the cancer, then I think they're going to be disappointed," Kump said. "If that's the question, then we can't answer that."

The meeting will try to answer the following questions:

■ Is there a known health risk for students who attend the school?

■ Is there chemical contamination in the soil, water or air on school grounds and, if so, what is the suggested remedy?

■ How many current and former students have had cancer since the school opened in 1979? Does that number exceed the expected rate of cancer during that 20-year period?

"We will provide as much information that we can get from the data that we have," said Claire Pospisil, spokeswoman for the New York State Department of Health.

"In many communities where we have done similar studies, we have not been able to identify a direct relationship between contaminants and a higher incidence of cancer," Pospisil said.

But that's exactly what parents, students and residents want to know.

"Is there anything in the ground that's causing a problem?" Julie Patros asked. "Did they test properly?"

Patros is the mother of Thomas Patros, a 1977 graduate of the high school who has developed cancer. She also is a leader of the Southside Elmira Environmental Action League, a grass-roots organization monitoring the state's investigation.

Another mother of a cancer victim said she will attend the meeting because she wants to know what caused her daughter's illness if it was not contamination at the school.

"No one's called my daughter to ask her about her cancer," said Frances Santiago of Keefe Street. "The only common denominator that we know is that they all go to Southside."

Santiago is the mother of 21-year-old Natalie Riccio, a 1987 graduate of Southside High School who is now a junior at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and Grace Torres, 15, who will begin her sophomore year at Southside in a few weeks.

Riccio was found to have leukemia in August 1997 and has been in remission after two years of vigorous treatment.

The state health department will update the public on the number of confirmed cases of cancer among students but will not be able to say

for sure what caused those cancers, Pospisil said.

"I know that question needs to be answered," said Slater, the environmental attorney from Buffalo who was hired by the city to act as a watchdog for residents.

"That's what's going to make parents feel better."

Slater represented 300 families who lived in the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, N.Y., in the 1970s. The community is known for an outbreak of childhood cancers that led to the evacuation of the area.

Scientists have not been able to prove that the chemicals found at Love Canal caused an increased cancer rate or other medical ailments, Slater said.

"In the last 20 years, science has not gotten any better about establishing causal links," Slater said. "Science wasn't there then, and it isn't there now. ... Wednesday's answer should be something like: 'We don't have enough information

but we will continue to look.'"

Slater, who will sit on the panel of experts at Wednesday's meeting, said he will also ensure that the right tests are being conducted and that informed questions are asked.

Kump said he hopes to release the soil sample test results before the meeting. He was still waiting for test results from the state Department of Environmental Conservation on Friday.

Slater said he anxiously awaits the results of those tests.

"It's important for me so I can say to my client that a thorough investigation has been conducted," he said.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation drilled approximately 55 soil borings and took 185 samples to test for a wide range of contaminants, Slater said.

"It appears that there was no cutting corners," he said.

Kump said he set the date for the public meeting before the test results were back because last spring officials promised the public that another public meeting would be held before school starts.

Classes are scheduled to begin Sept. 8 at Southside High School.



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