

Cancer: No health threat in school building

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than 100 years' worth of industrial waste is buried under the school. A few feet below the surface lie layers of cinders, discolored soil, brick and other building materials.

That soil also is contaminated with elevated levels of metals, an easily evaporated chemical called trichloroethylene (TCE), synthetic chemical pesticides called polychlorinated biphenyls, PCBs, and some petroleum-related contaminants called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, PAHs.

There is no current health risk to students and staff. However, the state health department recommends that the school district place a deed restriction on the property to prevent digging there. The health department also suggests the district have a plan if digging needs to occur.

Metals and low concentrations of the chemical compounds were also found in the surface soils collected from 41 locations on the school property however, only chromium, nickel and a couple of PCBs were above acceptable levels for a residential area. Even those slightly elevated levels don't pose a health threat, according to the health department's report.

Still, the state DDC reported that its concerns about contamination have shifted from the school property to two other sites where engineers discovered elevated levels of some contaminants including semi-volatile organic compounds, metals and pesticides. A semi-volatile organic compound easily evaporates and commonly comes from cleaning solvents, according to the DDC.

Additional testing will be done on the stream that links the holding pond on the American LaFrance property to Childsbrook Creek and also on the former American LaFrance recreation area, south-east of the industrial site. Those tests will indicate the extent of contamination and will help determine a suitable clean-up plan.

James Gillett, an ecotoxicology professor at Cornell University, reviewed state reports of contami-

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Dave Engert of Marcor Inc. of Rochester takes a core sample in May from the athletic field at Southside High School.

nants found at the former American LaFrance as well as similar reports from Southside High School for the Star-Gazette.

Gillett said the chemicals and metals found on the properties are commonly found at similar levels on former industrial sites all across the Southern Tier.

"These are really dangerous compounds, but we don't know how much of them really affects people's health," Gillett said.

The risk levels established by the Environmental Protection Agency often exaggerate the dangers to be on the safe side, said Gillett, who also is director of the Superfund basic research and education program at Cornell.

The levels are only part of what is used to evaluate the risk potential, Gillett said. More important is the amount of the toxin that actually can be absorbed by the body if it is inhaled or ingested, he said.

"There is a misconception that there is an exactness to those levels that's just not there," Gillett said. Many of the chemicals and metals found at Southside can be found in a variety of forms, as flakes, particles dissolved in water, salts or in other solid compounds, Gillett said.

Some are more dangerous and more absorbable than others, he said. Other substances found on Southside High School grounds, such as chromium, are an essential dietary nutrient, but some types of chromium, particularly the hexavalent form, are known carcinogens. Similarly, there are 209 different isomers (or chemical compounds) of Arclor 128, a PCB, which was also found to some extent at the school, according to the report. Each type

of Arclor poses a different risk level, Gillett said.

However, people are not likely to come into contact with the chemical contaminants and they are not likely to move in the soil, Gillett said.

"The worst thing is that the school is built on top of it," Gillett said. "The best thing is that the school is built on top of it."

The school site was chosen in the 1970s before federal legislation required polluted industrial sites to be cleaned up. Today, the site would have been cleaned if the contamination before the school could have been built, said Craig Slater, an environmental attorney hired by the city to oversee the site's investigation.

Slater has represented everyone from the Environmental Protection Agency to large industries to 200 families who lived in the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls. That community is known for its outbreak of childhood cancers that provoked the evacuation of the area.

He will sit on a panel of experts during tonight's meeting to address residents' concerns.

Also at tonight's meeting, representatives from the state health department expect to present the results of their cancer case investigation.

The presentation will disclose the number of current and former students who have had cancer since the school opened in 1975 and will address whether that number exceeds the expected rate of cancer during the 20-year period. A summary of the types of cancer will also be included.

At least 40 current and former students have developed cancer since the school opened. About 6,450



Thomas Kump, Chemung County director of environmental health

"The results of the state's investigation show that there are no consequential amounts of hazardous waste and there is no significant threat to public health or the environment at Southside High School."

Thomas Kump, Chemung County director of environmental health

students have graduated from the school since 1986. That number doesn't include students who transferred, quit or didn't graduate, according to a spokesman for the Elmira City School District.

Residents who attend the meeting can pick up copies of a two-page fact sheet regarding the Department of Health's report and a four-page fact sheet on the state DDC's test results, Kump said.

Residents will also learn how to obtain, view and comment on a more thorough, 34-page analysis of the health risks at Southside High School, produced by the state health department, Kump said.

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