

STAR GAZETTE

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CONCERN
SOUTHSIDE

Answers, more questions

Doubts greet air, soil results



By **MARGARET COSTELLO**
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State officials Wednesday night did little to ease residents' concerns about possible environmental hazards and the incidence of cancer among current and former students at Elmira's Southside High School.

In a two-hour presentation Wednesday night to more than 200 residents gathered in the Southside auditorium, officials of the state departments of Health and Environmental Conservation presented data showing that the overall cancer rate among current and former students was lower than what would be expected statistically, except for a group of students found to have testicular cancer since 1997.

The officials also said that the chemical contaminants buried in the soil surrounding the school do not pose a health threat. Air samples obtained inside and outside the school "is a safe place for kids to attend school," said Andy Carlson, director of the Health Department's Bureau of Environmental Exposure and Investigation. "Would I have built a school there today? No, it wouldn't be prudent because there is contamination."

The officials said they intend to conduct more tests of soil and air at the school, particularly at some athletic fields on the north end of the property.

Only a handful of samples were collected in that area. Old maps of the former Remington Rand factory once located there showed that area to be the site of heavy industrial activity, said Craig Slater, an environmental attorney hired by the city of Elmira to monitor the investigation.

Slater recommended that a residents advisory committee be created to air residents' concerns and to guide the state's future investigations.

See D04R18/4A

Fears remain for many

By **CHARLIE COON**
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Gilbert Torres came to Southside High School seeking answers.

"Is it safe for my daughter to be here?" Torres asked Wednesday night. "And is it safe for the other kids, too?"

One of Torres' daughters, Natalie Reccio, is a 1997 Southside graduate who now attends college in Ohio. She has leukemia, but it has been in remission for two years. "Thank the Lord she is still in remission," Frances Santiago, Natalie's mother, said before the meeting.

But one of Torres' other daughters, 15-year-old Grace Torres, is scheduled on Sept. 5 to start her sophomore year at Southside, where a number of past and current students have contracted cancer.

The school was built on property that was used for industrial manufacturing from the 1890s to 1974. Plants that operated there, such as Remington Rand and American LaFrance, provided livelihoods for many area residents. But many feel the industrial past of the site is the reason why a seemingly large number of Southside students have gotten cancer.

At Wednesday's meeting, health officials presented results of air and soil testing at the 1,100-student school. They said the level of contaminants and metals found were normal and acceptable. Officials also said the number of cancer cases among current and former Southside students is what would be expected.

Those findings did not sit well with many of those affected by the disease.

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Southside High School

ERIC BANKS/Star-Gazette



Gilbert Torres listens to the state's findings Wednesday with his daughter, Grace Torres, 15, and wife, Frances Santiago, third from right, at Southside High School.

MARIA STRINNI/Star-Gazette

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