

## Southside: Interest in cancer case goes nationwide

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the national media. Some parents of area children with cancer are enthusiastic about the widespread coverage of a concern that they believe deserves attention. Others involved in the investigation worry that large-scale coverage could complicate issues and might slow the release of information.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has taken soil samples from the property around the school at 777 S. Main St. The state also sampled surface water. Air test results released Monday showed no chemical contaminants inside the school.

The other samples are being tested for a variety of contaminants, and complete results are expected to be presented during a public meeting later this month. No date has been set.

At least 40 current and former students have developed cancer since the school opened in 1979.

A free-lance writer from Colorado has shown interest in writing a magazine article about the cancer cases at Southside, said Julie Patros, a founder of the Southside Elmira Environmental Action League, a grass-roots group that is monitoring the state's investigation.

Patros sent information about the investigation to the writer, Maury Hansen of Grand Junction, Colo. Hansen was out of the country and could not be reached for comment last week.

Patros also has been in communi-

cation with the Center for Health, Environment and Justice in Church Falls, Va., about participating in the center's "Poisoned Schools" Day of Action. The date of the event has not been scheduled.

The Day of Action will launch the center's Child Proofing Our Communities campaign and release the campaign's "Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions" report, according to Deb Benyik, children's health coordinator at the center.

The report documents problems with various school sites across the country and instructs parents and community members on how to voice their concerns before schools are built and to ensure that the safety and health of children is considered, Benyik said.

### Coverage helps cause

Patros and other parents say any attention from national media can only help.

"I think it's a great thing," said Timothy Tobin, whose son, Michael, has cancer and is preparing to return for his junior year at Southside.

"If the letter hadn't been released to the media, then none of this would have transpired," Timothy Tobin said. "The tests, the people coming forward to give information, the awareness — none of that would have happened."

The Tobin and Patros families plunged into the limelight in April. A letter on the cancer cases written

by the two families and two Elmira City Council members was sent to the Elmira school board. In April, the letter was released to the media.

Timothy Tobin said he and his wife, Maggie, have discussed the publicity concerns with their family and will only talk about things with which the children, particularly Michael, feel comfortable.

"With more media coverage, the public departments are going to be more responsive," Patros said. "They won't be able to push it under the rug."

"It doesn't only benefit our area," Patros said. "There are tons of communities going through similar things."

Tobin said that national media coverage of the Southside High School investigation will encourage communities to take a more active role in promoting good health and cleaning up their own back yards.

"Health issues and environmental issues are everywhere," Tobin said. "If you started looking anywhere, especially in the industrial Northeast, you can find something to fix."

### Holding out for answers

City Councilman James Hare, D-6th, a history teacher at Southside who signed the letter to the school board, said he prefers that the cancer investigation not be covered by the national media, at least not yet.

"I've tried to counsel patience," Hare said. "We need to exercise due diligence about not jumping to conclusions. We do not have soil sample

results back.

"Publicity fans the flames of emotion," Hare said. "We have to be careful of the overreaction. I would just assume (national media) did not come."

Craig Slater, an environmental lawyer hired by the city of Elmira to oversee the state's investigation, said his experience has taught him that publicity often is a double-edged sword.

Slater represented several families who lived in the Love Canal neighborhood, a heavily polluted community near Niagara Falls, N.Y. The state closed an elementary school on the property and evacuated 235 families from the neighborhood in 1978.

"You'll have a mixed bag," Slater said. "Public pressure can be useful. Public scrutiny and outcries do work. Publicity does different things for different people."

Sometimes the increased interest will make officials more cooperative and conscious about releasing information, Slater said.

Other times, officials will be less likely to talk candidly about an issue because they will be worried about lawsuits, Slater said.

Health officials depend on the media as an outlet to educate and share information with the community, Kump said.

"No community wants to be portrayed in a negative way," Kump said.

"But if we do have a cancer problem, that is bad, but how we're handling it could be positive."

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