

# Resident calls for air tests on empty school

■ But health department officials prefer taking samples under normal conditions.

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**CONCERN** on the  
**SOUTHSIDE**

Jack Keefe thinks the best way to prove the air in Southside High School is safe is to close the school for two weeks, keep everyone out and then sample the air.

Keefe, a former Elmira City Council member who has grandchildren at the school, plans to ask the Elmira School Board to do just that during the board's 7 p.m. meeting today.

Keefe, who lives a few blocks from the school, said such tests this summer would produce air samples uncontaminated with substances brought to the school by students and staff members.

"It's the best way to put the citizens' minds at peace about any possible contamination at the school," said Keefe, of South Hampton Road. He was a city councilman from 1969 to 1980.

Keefe's request comes after parents and city officials wrote to the school board in April about the seemingly high rate of cancer among students.

To date, the Chemung County Health Department is aware of at least 38 current or former students who have developed cancer since the school opened in 1979, said Thomas Kump, director of environmental health at the county Health Department and a school board member.

Keefe's made his request after he learned about air tests done at the school in 1997, which found trace amounts of hazardous solvents and chemicals, such as benzene and tetrachloroethene. While school officials did not rule out the possibility that the trace amounts of chemicals originated from contaminated soil, they said the chemicals could have come from everything from marking pens to cleaning products.

That's why Keefe wants the tests conducted when the school is empty — to prevent marking pens and cleaning products from skewing test results.

Meanwhile, the district and public wait for air and soil test results from samples taken three weeks ago when school was in session.

Those results are expected within two weeks, Kump said.

It's going to be up to the New York State Department of Health to act on Keefe's request.

Kump and school board President Deborah Pierce referred the question to state health officials.

Clair Papisil, a spokeswoman for the state health department, said the state

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