

CONCERN on the
SOUTHSIDE

Group monitors probe

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Three sets of parents and two Elmira City Council members have formed a grass-roots organization to monitor the state's investigation of potential environmental hazards near Southside High School.

Julie Patros, one of the parents, says the group, the Southside Elmira Environmental Action League, hopes to be a driving force in obtaining truthful answers about possible health hazards at the 20-year-old school, which was built on a former industrial site.

"We see our role as a catalyst and as an interest watchdog," said council member James Hare, D-40, who is part of the grass-roots group. "We're here to make sure that everyone responsible for testing and evaluating does their homework."

The other council member in the group is Daniel Hoyte, D-20.

The environmental probe was spurred by parents' concerns about a possibly high rate of cancer among current and former students at Southside, 77 S. Main St.

Julie and Andy Patros' 21-year-old son was found to have testicular cancer in 1997. He is one of 40 former Southside students with cancer who have reported their diagnoses to the Chemung County Health Department, said Thomas Kump, the county's director of environmental health.

The state Department of Health will examine the results of air, water and soil samples taken on and around the school property by the Department of Environmental Conservation to determine whether there is contamination and, if so, whether the levels pose a health risk to students and staff members. Preliminary test results are expected in the second week of July, Kump said.

The new group has sought help from the Center for Health, Environment and Justice in Falls Church, Va., which advises community groups on how to fight environmental threats, Julie Patros said.

The center was founded by Lois Gibbs, the former housewife who led the fight to have families relocated after buried chemical waste surfaced in Love Canal in 1978.

The center assists 4,000 United States communities by providing organizational material, information and research resources and additional contacts with other communities with similar problems.

Julie Patros said the local group had asked for information on toxins and how they affect children. The group also intends to send the test results from the school to a toxicologist who works for the health center in Virginia.

"We're getting a crash course in chemistry," she said.

Anyone interested in joining the Southside Elmira Environmental Action League can call Patros at 607/753-8696 or Hare at 607/753-7668.

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