

Cancer: Love Canal lawyer signs on

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"Personally, I did not feel that the (state's) investigation was going to get deep enough to make parents comfortable about sending their kids to the school," Hughes said. He referred to the "deep fear" some parents and other residents had about the possible contamination at the school.

Slater, who has worked as an environmental lawyer for 20 years, described his role as that of a watchdog, who will ensure that the proper tests are being done and that results are being turned over in a timely fashion.

Slater is working on a similar case at Medina High School in Medina, N.Y., where high levels of arsenic were found on the surface soil of the football field. That case began in the early 1980s and is still unresolved. However, the football field is not

being used anymore, Slater said.

Slater has worked for the city during the cleanup of the Trinity Foundry site at Woodlawn and College avenues and the Erie Plaza on the Southside.

He said it took 10 years to convince the government that there were extensive chemical wastes beneath a large neighborhood called Love Canal in Niagara Falls, N.Y., in 1978. Slater worked on the Love Canal investigation.

In August 1978, President Carter declared the neighborhood's situation a federal emergency and the state health commissioner ordered closure of the school there.

"I don't think that this (Southside High School property) is on the same level as Love Canal," Slater said. "But it's certainly worth looking into. We're here to give information. We're going to look at the science, the soil and those kinds of

things."

The City Council is expected to vote to spend several thousand dollars to pay for the first phase of Slater's investigation at its next meeting on June 19, Hughes said. Slater has not been paid yet, Hughes said. City attorney John Ryan will assist the council in establishing a cap on the amount the city will pay Slater, Hughes said.

"For us, it's not a matter of money," Hughes said. "It's a matter of the public's well-being. We hope that this will reassure people that the most thorough possible investigation is being done."

Meanwhile, Slater has already begun conducting interviews with state and local health and environmental officials and hopes to interview former employees at Remington Rand. He is also collecting environmental reports, historical documents and maps of the 83-acre parcel on South Main Street. He hopes to issue a written analysis of the investigation before school begins in September.


Councilman James Hare, D-6th, who is a driving force behind the investigation, said he considers Slater to be the second opinion sought when a person is found to have a serious illness.

Hare said he hopes Slater's reputation and experience will spur on the Elmira school district and the conservation department, which, according to Hare, have so far shown a "lack of curiosity and drive" about answering people's questions.

Andy Patros, who was one of the four parents at Thursday's meeting, said he was pleased that the city has hired Slater. Patros' son, Tom, who is now 21, was found to have cancer in 1997.

"They've shown that they really care about the community and their people," Patros said. "(Slater) is very experienced and is more than competent. He'll know the right questions to ask — what should be done, why it should be done."

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