

STAR-GAZETTE
 www.stargazette.com Wednesday, May 3, 2000 New York Edition
 The first Gannett newspaper Elmira, New York 50 cents

CONCERN
SOUTHSIDE

High school found safe

Environmental tests at Southside reveal no health hazards

By JIM PIFFER
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Southside High School is not a health hazard to students and staff. That's the conclusion of a three-week preliminary investigation of seemingly high rates of cancer at the school at 77 S. Main St., state health officials said Tuesday evening during a public meeting at the school.

"We've taken a lot of air and water samples at the school and we haven't detected anything in high enough levels to be a health hazard," said LaSalle Jr., a health and safety hygienist for Schuylcr-Channing-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services. More than 600 people attended the meeting to get more information about why 13 Southside students and former students have developed cancer since 1997. The school, which opened in fall 1975, was built on former industrial property. The soil under the school is contaminated with fuel oil that's being cleaned up. Other information provided at the meeting:

- At least 22 people have contacted Channing County health officials since early April to report that they have cancer. It was not immediately known whether all 22 attended the school. Health officials have not had time to confirm those cases or to determine whether those numbers are unusually high. Any additional cancer cases reported to the department will be disclosed to the public by the end of summer.
- Officials do not know what caused the student cancers at Southside or whether they are connected to the known contamination at the school. The soil under the school will continue to be tested, beginning Monday. Results of those tests are expected to be available in three to four weeks.

On 6A
 ■ Details of Tuesday meeting
 ■ Key players speak out
 ■ Residents share concerns
 ■ Schuylcr-Channing-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services

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Community voices

Andrea Smith, 17, of Sycamore Street, a Southside senior: "If we didn't come tonight, we'd hear rumors all over the place at school tomorrow. I think it's more Elmira than the school that's causing it."

James Milhouse, 42, of Holdridge Street, whose son is a junior at Southside: "I'm interested in the results of the tests, what types of cancers are involved and why it's not affecting adults. There's a lot of ambiguity. I think they're on the right track. But if there's a problem, I want to pull my son out of there."

Laura Gray, 45, of Kiryon Street: "My husband and I grew up here, but we just moved back from Buffalo. We told our daughter how much she'd love it here and how much safer the school would be. She came home the first day of school and said, 'Mom, I can't drink the water. I'll get cancer.' It seems to me the cancer rate is entirely too high for them to say it's nothing to worry about."

Sue Sykora, 45, of Pine City: "They're not addressing anything. We all know what cancer is. What we want to know is whether these children have anything else in common besides this site. My son is a freshman at Southside, and he loves school for the first time in his life. I don't want to have to pull him out of here. I don't want to disrupt his lifestyle, but I don't want my kid to die of cancer."

The Rev. Michael Yedinak, 26, of Big Falls, pastor of the Universal Life Church: "They're saying the chemicals in the air at the school are from hair spray or pens or perfume. They should test the air from other schools and compare it with the Southside results to see if the traces of chemicals are the same."

Frances Santiago's daughter, Natalie Recio, 21, found out in 1997 that she had leukemia.

For one family, few new answers

By MARGARET COSTELLO
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Natalie Recio knows about waiting. She waited for several weeks in August 1997 to find out that her chronic fatigue was actually leukemia. She anticipated seeing long, curly locks of her rich, brown hair on her pillow each morning before the chemotherapy actually thinned her thick head of hair.

She put off her freshman year of college to endure a year's worth of treatments that left her bald and bloated. Now, she must be patient while state and county health officials determine whether Southside High School poses a health risk.

Recio, a 21-year-old sophomore at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, came home during final exams to attend

See FAMILY 16A



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Fri, Mar 29, 2019