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**Editorial**  
**Searching for answers**  
 ■ Our view: Southside forum didn't calm fears, but did promise an ongoing investigation.

The public meeting regarding cancer cases at Southside High School answered some questions but not enough. With what evidence they had gathered, state health and environmental officials said the school was safe, but many in the audience openly expressed skepticism.

And why shouldn't they? In the past three weeks, they have learned that since 1987, as many as 13 current and former students have been reported to have cancer. They also have learned that fuel oil still contaminates the soil beneath the high school and the Southside neighborhoods near the school. And they have found out that a cleanup at the former American LaFrance site next door to the school has turned up a long list of chemical and metal pollutants in the soil.

It's obvious from the meeting that officials need to keep the investigation a No. 1 priority and aggressively determine whether the environment on Southside Elmira, not just in the school, has caused people to become sick.

So far, the facts about past pollution in the area have intensified worries and rumors that have surrounded the cancer cases since they were brought to school officials' attention nearly four weeks ago. The district didn't take the concerns lightly and, to its credit, quickly set up Tuesday's meeting to answer the public's concerns.

While officials gave the school a qualified safety approval, they also acknowledged that they need to do more testing and also must investigate the reported cancer cases to see if there's a connection to the school.

Tracking cancer causes is not an exact science, and for that reason, this community may never know for sure what caused the high number of cancer cases among its children.

For that reason, any reassurance from public officials about the school's safety will find little credibility unless they also can explain the Southside cancer cases.

That explanation, the audience was told Tuesday, will take time. How much? Well, the end of the summer, said one official. Maybe two months, said another. The ambiguity only added to the uncertainty and here's where state, county and school district officials must be more definitive.

People want to know, with certainty, whether the school made these kids sick. They didn't get that Tuesday. Maybe they will when the state returns with another report — presumably before September.

Until then, here are some things the school and community must do:

- The community must be patient — not an easy task when parents and students are anxious about their health. One parent questioned whether the school should be closed until all doubts about its safety are eliminated. That seems premature, given the evidence we're handed. Further investigations, though, may prove otherwise. The wait is painful, but there's no avoiding it.
- State and county officials must be open with information to the public. As soon as a report or test is complete, they must release it. As one audience member said, give us the news, even if it's bad.
- The school district must keep students at Southside as thoroughly informed as Tuesday's meeting. If that means councilors and assemblies in the school, then the district should do so.
- Finally, the school board must take a public position on this. Board members should discuss this in public and let parents and students know what will be done next.

Except for board president Deborah Pierce, the district's leadership has been conspicuously silent on this subject. As elected leaders of the district, board members must add their voice to this important discussion.

Tuesday's meeting helped establish an open dialogue between residents and the authorities. It still left many people dissatisfied, but the effort alone showed that Southside residents are not alone in trying to get to the bottom of this medical mystery.

**CONCERN**  
**SOUTHSIDE**

**Getting help**

- **State health and environment:** State health and environmental officials recommended the following contacts to people who need more information regarding the cancer cases at Southside.
  - **HEALTH CONCERNS:** Dawn Henrich, assistant state health officer, Southside 1106, Box 2160, Elmira, N.Y. 14901; 315-733-7326; Mark VanDusen, outreach coordinator, 322-08-156, ext. 2733.
  - **State Dept. of Health:** Don Owen, for the state health department.
  - **CANCER CONCERNS:** Sara Weinstein, director, cancer services program, 315-474-2524.
- **MILLER POLYMERFORMER REMEDIATION FUND ON:** SPAL, Scott Rodriguez, state Department of Environment, Conservation, 607-738-0203.
- **FORMER AMERICAN LAFRANCE CLEANUP:**
  - **LAKEVIEW, DEC office:** In Avon, 716-226-2564.
  - **Heeger Baker-Cheese, DEC:** In Avon, 716-226-6338.

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Fri, Mar 29, 2019