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State called on to share test results

■ Board wants to know any time school areas are tested or cleaned up.

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Members of the Elmira school board say they plan to campaign for new legislation to require that schools near hazardous waste or spill sites be notified of any tests or cleanups on those properties.

"If testing is done next-door to a school, the results should be given to that school immediately," school board President Deborah Pierce said Tuesday during a regular board meeting held at Southside High School.

The school, located at 777 S. Main Street, is located on a former industrial site and next-door to the former American LaFrance plant, which recently underwent hazardous waste cleanup. Research by the Chemung County Health Department and the Star-Gazette shows that at least 24 students who have attended Southside High School have developed cancer since the school opened in 1979. The state Health Department is investigating.

Pierce said the school was never notified by the state Department of Environmental Conservation about the investigation or what it found at the LaFrance site.

"I'm amazed that the information isn't already required to be passed on," said board vice president Robert Donahue.

Pierce urged board members to write state Sen. John R. Kuhl Jr., R-Hammondsport, and state Assemblyman George Winner, R-Elmira, to request new laws that would improve communication between schools and environmental regulators. Pierce said she would also lobby through the New York State School Boards Association.

In the board's first meeting since parents and City Council members asked the district to examine Southside's reportedly high cancer rate, Donahue and other board members praised the Chemung County Health Department for its quick action in organizing a community forum on the issue last week. Board member Thomas Kump is also the director of environmental health for the county health department.

"Experts provided information that should give people some level of comfort that the school is safe," Donahue said.

Southside student board representative Courtney Supple said students are relatively calm, although eager to hear what experts can tell them at a special meeting Thursday. "We're all being pretty realistic," Supple said. "No one thinks they're going to die. No one thinks this is Love Canal."

Pierce encourages everyone who calls her with concerns about the cancer rate to call the health department at 607/737-2021. "They're the only people with factual information at this point," she said.

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