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### Southside: Group seeks survey

Continued from Page 1A

I don't think it would be a bad idea to survey everyone, including cafeteria workers and custodians."

At least nine current or recent employees at Southside have developed cancer, according to information collected by the Star-Gazette. The school employs about 100 educators and 40 other staff members.

Controversy surfaced at Southside in April when a group of parents and Elmira City Council members sent a letter to the school district demanding to know whether contaminated land has contributed to a seemingly high cancer rate among students. Six students and seven former students at the school have developed a variety of cancers in the past three years, the letter stated.

The county and state health departments have since launched an investigation to determine whether pollutants, such as pockets of underground fuel oil, are linked to the illnesses.

So far, the investigation has focused on documenting cancer cases among students at Southside since 1978, when it opened. Health officials have gathered information on at least 25 students who have developed cancer since the school opened 21 years ago. Star-Gazette research indicates there were two other cancer cases among former students that had not been reported to the county.

#### Reports trickle in

The county health department continues to receive a few more reports of cancer, said Thomas Kump, director of environmental health for the agency and an Elmira school board member. Some people are getting to report their cancer cases directly to the state health department, Kump said.

He is compiling the information from callers single-handedly while the department's other nine workers handle the agency's more common tasks, such as investigating rabies cases and issuing food service and swimming pool permits.

Kump said the county health department does not currently phone to survey graduates by mail or phone.

"We're relying on the cooperation of the community to get this word out and get back to us," Kump said. "It is very difficult for us to pursue actively."

Surviving former students would require the group involved in the investigation to figure out who would create the questionnaires, compile a mailing list, fund the research, collect the responses and establish a schedule, Kump said.

"We have to do this in steps," Kump said. "The concern is that continuing Southside High School is causing cancer among students. We need to find the answer to that. Then we can go from there."

The 1,100-student school at 777 S. Main St. was built on a former industrial property that is contaminated with fuel oil. The state Department of Environmental Conservation began cleaning up the petroleum, which is about 15 feet underground, on Monday by pumping oxygen into the ground to activate bacteria that will break down the contaminants into hydrogen and water.

Environmental engineers also are testing the soil at the school for metals, some volatile and semi-volatile compounds, and polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCBs, a toxic liquid often used as an insulator in electrical equipment. Similar contaminants were found at the former American Lath plant, an industrial site that is adjacent to the school and underwent a hazardous waste cleanup that was completed in December 1998.

#### Former teachers come forward

Theresa Auld, who taught music at Southside High for a year in 1985, said she decided to report her cancer to the health department and newspaper because she thought it might help others come forward to report their illnesses.

Auld, 58, of Millport, was found to have breast cancer in 1997. She quit teaching music at Elmira's Riverside Elementary School at the time. Now, she is teaching music at Elmira's Purley Coburn Elementary School. She said her cancer is in remission.

"I can really relate to these kids," Auld said. "The numbers of cancer cases started me quite a bit."

Lynn Grotzenbacher, the Elmira Teachers Association president, said three current teachers at Southside High School have told her they have cancer. She would not disclose their identities or the types of cancer for reasons of confidentiality.

"I believe the district has done everything they can do," Grotzenbacher said. "Their concern, like ours, is very real."

Grotzenbacher said collecting information about dozens of people with a variety of cancers is daunting because there are so many factors that lead to the development of cancer.

"Family history is critical," Grotzenbacher said. "That's the first step. But it's hard to much easier to blame a public school."

Even though cancer runs in Elmira's Friedrich family, she said the district should still conduct a health survey just to be thorough in the investigation. Her father, Robert Dean, died in 1996 at age 65 from colon cancer. Dean worked as a custodian at Southside for five years in the 1960s.

"I think his death was more genetic than from anything at the school," Friedrich said.

#### Calls for action

Friedrich's family also lives across the street from one of the Southside students who has cancer.

Friedrich said her nephew, Jeremy Dean, a freshman at Southside High, recently went to the doctor to be tested for cancer. Doctors did not find any signs of cancer in his system.

"My nephew is terrified," she said. "I think the kids are on pins and needles." She said she would like to see a community agency sponsor a cancer screening clinic to help alleviate the students' worries.

Jim Hare, a social studies teacher at Southside and one of the two Elmira City Council members who signed the April letter, said the faculty has informally discussed the seemingly high numbers of students with cancer. But he said he was not aware of any cancer among staff.

"Let's get all the information on the number of cancers," Hare said. "The district needs to send out a (medical) survey as an aggressive way to get a diagnosis. It's absolutely necessary."

In an ideal world, Kump said, someone could gather health information from the 20,000 graduates of the school and the hundreds of former employees.

"It's in it for the long haul," Kump said. "I have 18 years left before retirement. I will continue working on this until we've addressed everyone's concerns."

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