

More cancer cases found

■ At least 24 cases known; some involve rare forms of disease.

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At least 24 students who have attended Southside High School have developed cancer since the Elmira school opened in 1979, according to the Chemung County Health Department and Star-Gazette research.

The preliminary numbers — collected during an ongoing investigation into possible connections between the school facility and cancer cases there — are not high, but some of the cancers found are rare, an area oncologist said.

Still, the fact that the investigation continues is a source of concern to officials.

"My gut feeling is that it's significant," Thomas Kump, director of environmental health for the county and an Elmira school board member, said of the reported cancer cases among students.

The investigation has not yet expanded to include staff and faculty members, Kump said.

Twenty-four former and current students of Southside High School have developed cancer. Two of those students have died. The 1,100-student school was built in 1979 on a former industrial property that is contaminated with fuel oil underground.

The reported cancers include leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and lymphoma, and testicular, ovarian, breast, brain, skin, cervical, colon and soft-tissue cancers.

The health department has a list of 22 cases, but Kump said that list does not include a Southside graduate recently found to have colon cancer who has previously been interviewed and photographed by the Star-Gazette. Nor did Kump's list include another graduate who died in 1997 at age 31 of glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer.

Those two cases were apparently not reported to the health department. The total number now stands at 24.

"Those numbers and disease are fairly typical of that age group, although some of the cancers, like breast cancer, are rare in young people," said Dr. Thomas Abderhalden, an oncologist and medical director of the Falk Cancer Center at Arnot Ogden Medical Center in Elmira.

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■ Field south of high school to be tested/3



MARLA STRONG/Star-Gazette

Boys fish at Miller Pond on Elmira's Southside in April. The pond, which has been found to be contaminated with slight amounts of petroleum, has been a favorite recreation spot for generations.

Miller Pond worries neighbors

■ Some living near contaminated water want quick action; others say pollution doesn't exist.

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To many Southside residents, Miller Pond is the prettiest spot in Elmira, the place they ice skated around bonfires as children and fished for bass as adults.

But some have become afraid of the beautiful spot they loved for so long.

Arthur Symonds, 74, who lives on Parkside Drive across from the 3-acre pond, wanders out to its shore some mornings with neighbors to mark oily spots with stones.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon he stirred the water with a long stick and watched as oily bubbles rose, producing a rainbow sheen that drifted across the water in long streaks. When he lifted the stick, it smelled like oil.

"The odor is terrible," he said. "Something in that water is not

right. I'm scared of it."

Symonds said he has seen the oil contamination ever since moving to Parkside Drive 16 years ago. Soccer fields, a playground and tennis courts are adjacent to the pond, a recreation spot for kids and adults.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation tested the pond for petroleum in 1998 after neighbors reported the problem to the agency.

The first tests of the pond water showed minimal levels of petroleum, which contains some cancer-causing chemicals. Slightly more petroleum was found in 1997 tests.

The DEC traced the contaminants to the Southside High School property, a former industrial site where five to seven petroleum tanks once were buried. Next door to the school is the former American LaFrance factory site, which until recently was contaminated with hazardous chemicals. At both sites, the pollution is underground.

But at Miller Pond, it comes to the surface, so at times animals and children can come into direct contact with it.

Testing for pollutants

The contamination has gained wider attention since health and environmental experts began

CONCERN on the SOUTHSIDE

investigating a possibly elevated cancer rate among Southside students, prompting neighbors to wonder whether they had been even more directly exposed.

"That stuff is flowing under my house," Symonds said.

In 1998, nine homes on Parkside Drive underwent air tests in their basements or crawl spaces to determine whether petroleum fumes were a danger to residents.

Tests at two houses revealed traces of tetrachloroethene — a probable carcinogen used in industrial solvents and metal degreasing agents.

Otherwise, nothing unusual was found.

The high school and surrounding neighborhood have not been tested for metals, common contaminants at former industrial sites. Some LaFrance soil samples showed concentrations of metals such as arsenic, beryllium and chromium that exceeded acceptable standards set by the DEC. In large amounts, these metals can cause cancer.

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