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Miller Pond

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School property is being tested for metals, but there are no plans to test the neighborhood.

Southside High and the Miller Pond area also have been checked for petroleum contamination. Although one lab and the DEC have agreed that the fuel oil found in the pond and on school property come from the same source, another lab says they are unrelated.

For now, the DEC is operating under the assumption that the oil all comes from the school campus.

The highest concentrations of pollutants outside of school property were on the west side of Miller Pond and in an empty field behind the houses on Parkside Drive.

So far nothing has been done to clean up these areas.

It's still probably not a health threat, even to babies eating dirt, said John Richer, senior toxicologist for the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

"You'd have to drink or eat a concentrated amount before it would affect you," Richer said. "And breathing it could make you dizzy or give you a headache, but it probably wouldn't have long-term effects in the amounts you're talking about."

Plans for cleanup

The DEC plans to begin pumping oxygen into the soil and water at Southside High next week to activate organisms that will break down the petroleum contaminants into carbon dioxide and water.

After the oil on school land is water away—a process that is expected to take about a year—the process will be repeated in the Parkside Drive neighborhood, DEC environmental engineer Scott Rodabaugh said.

Both cleanup operations were planned a year ago, Rodabaugh said, but the DEC has been negotiating with Unisys Corp., the successor to Remington Rand, over responsibility for the cleanup.

Seeking answers

But waiting a year is too much for residents who say they have already been put off too long.

Symonds said he remembers calling Southport town officials to alert them to the oil in the pond at least a year before any action was taken.

Robert Masia, the Southport town supervisor, remembers this.

"It didn't seem like a complaint," he said. "It was more like an observation. Who knew whether somebody just changed the oil on their car and then dumped it?"

If he had received many complaints, Masia said, he would have informed the DEC, but he didn't think the oil on the pond was a significant problem at the time.

Other officials were also contacted.

"My husband went to an Elmira City Council meeting in 1989 to say the pond was contaminated because it never froze," said Mary Uplikie, who lives on Hampton Road about a block from Miller Pond. "Why wasn't something done then?"

Jim Hare, who was mayor from 1987 until the end of 1989, remembers City Council discussions of algae in the pond but not pollution.

Bill Phillips, 34, who lives on Hampton Road on the east side of the pond, said that regardless of when officials learned of the problem, they are obligated to clean it up now.

"Years to clean up is not an

Testing to include field near high school

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Ed Austin has known for years that there was something funny about the field behind Oldside Avenue on Elmira's Southside, where he lives.

There are large brown patches in the former recreation area that served industrial plants that once operated there. Even weeds won't grow there. But for years, many neighborhood children have played in the field, which is located between their homes and the Notre Dame High School football field.

Austin's son, Scott, was one of those children. He died in 1997 at age 31 of glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer. Scott Austin attended Southside High School, which is now being investigated for a reportedly high cancer rate among its students.

Southside High sits on a former industrial site that was once home to factories operated by companies

such as Remington Rand and American LaFrance. The American LaFrance factory next to the school recently underwent a hazardous waste cleanup.

Ed Austin complained last week at a public hearing about the archeology-looking spots in the field south of the plant. Now, New York State Health Department and state Department of Environmental Conservation officials plan to test the factory's recreation area. The spot was once used for employee baseball games and picnics.

Soil tests for metals, volatile and semi-volatile compounds, and polychlorinated biphenyls (also known as PCBs, a toxic liquid often used as an insulator in electrical equipment) will be conducted this week at the same time as tests of the high school, said Mary Jane Peachey, regional hazardous waste remediation engineer with the conservation department. Test results probably will not be available for 30 days.

The groundwater on the property was tested for contamination

about three times since the early 1990s, Peachey said, but no contaminants were found.

Peachey said the state Department of Health will choose surface soil testing locations, probably in the bald spots and in a garden kept by resident Rodney VanGelder.

"We were not aware that people were using that area," Peachey said. "That was information we got last week. I'm not sure the current owner even knows about that."

VanGelder, 71, has grown flowers and vegetables in the field behind his home for at least 25 years. The Remington Rand and American LaFrance employee had prostate cancer a decade ago. He has been in remission for eight years.

VanGelder said he does not believe there is a connection between his cancer and possible contamination in the field. "Maybe if you were right out there working in that spot, it would be bad," he said. "But I'm 90 or 60 feet away."

Still, he can name nine people within a block of his home who had

and cook their dinners with water from the pond.

The field behind Winner's house and the others on Parkside Drive is the area in the neighborhood where DEC tests found petroleum nearest the surface.

The last is owned by Mark Twain Little League Inc. but has never been developed into a baseball field, and there is no road access. The Little League group has said it has no plans to improve the area. But young people do frequent the field, a mix of gravel, weeds, shrubs and grass.

"Teen-agers ride their bikes in that area," said Cindy Davis, who has lived on Parkside Drive for 15 years. Her sons, now grown, used to cut through the field and across the railroad tracks to go to Southside High School.

Winner said he and his neighbors used to walk the paths through the field, and he has seen many students who lived on Hampton Road cut through the field on their way home from Southside.

Neither Davis nor Winner sees the field as a health risk.

Many people continue to fish in the pond, walk on its banks and picnic next to the playground.

Rodabaugh said petroleum in the lake does not contaminate the fish. "That kind of stuff doesn't bioaccumulate," Rodabaugh said, explaining that although fish may swim through the substance, it doesn't stay in their bodies. The state Health Department does not list Miller Pond among the ponds and lakes where fish are unsafe to eat.

A place to play

Many people who use the pond and live nearby are not concerned about contamination. Parkside Drive resident Paul Winner, 56, said he hasn't seen oil on the pond for several years.

"We don't worry about it," he said.

Winner and his family have long been advocates and users of the park, which has a covered picnic area, swings, slides and climbing equipment for kids. Winner and his daughter were once models for a postcard of ice skaters on the pond.

In the late '90s, you could see 100 people skating at a time, and they would build big bonfires," he said.

Winner enjoys recounting the history of the pond and Parkside Drive, even named his street. In 1949, when the road was still known as Moore

Street, Winner suggested to the city that it be renamed so people could more easily find the park and pond.

Winner's past neighbors told him that the spot where his home now stands was once a place where bobos would jump off passing trains.

"I'm fighting mad," Ed Austin said, struggling against tears as he recalled Scott Austin dying in his arms. "I don't want other neighbors going through this, losing children. It's not just the high school, it's the whole area."

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