

Southside: School safe, tests confirm

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the ground to collect more than 150 soil samples from all over campus.

■ The dirt that appeared to be most contaminated was sent to labs to be tested for more than 100 contaminants, which cost \$800 for each sample.

■ The process was repeated a couple of times if an unusual level of a contaminant was found.

■ Any contaminant found at the school was assessed for health risks by using "the worst-case scenario" and that even using this method, no health risks were determined.

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Since May, the state has spent about \$500,000 and invested more than 500 hours analyzing environmental contamination at Southside High School, which was built in 1979 on a property dirtied by more than a century of heavy industrial use, Carlson and Peachey said.

The state advised the school district in the August Health Consultation to establish a soil management plan that would minimize public exposure to the subsurface soils where there was more contamination, Carlson said.

The state health Department is also investigating an unusually high rate of testicular cancer found among Southside students since 1997, and it determined that other cancer rates among students and graduates were normal or lower than normal.

Some people who attended Monday's meeting said they felt comfortable with the state's findings

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state environmental official

and would like to see the athletic fields reopened so spring sports won't have to be relocated like the fall sports teams were.

The school board closed the athletic fields and McNaught Field on Aug. 29, saying the district needed more information before accepting the state's findings.

"The state has now said twice that the school is safe," said Cathy Hammond of Elmira, who has a daughter at Southside. "It's time that we put this behind us. My heart goes out to these people who have sick kids, but we've got to go on. What more can they do?"

Rick Kennedy, an attorney hired by the Elmira City School District and a co-chairperson of the advisory committee, calmed a heated exchange about the fields between Hammond and some parents whose sons have developed cancer.

"The committee and the district are painfully aware that there is a tension between those who have accepted the state's conclusions

and those who have not," Kennedy said. "There's no getting around this tension. But we're trying to reach a conclusion that will satisfy these diverse interests."

The school district has hired Golder Associates, an environmental engineering group based in Niagara Falls, to review the state's findings and also to determine whether there is a potential risk at McNaught Field, an athletic field near the school that is used by Southside students.

Also, the committee has applied for technical assistance from the Northeast Hazardous Substance Research Center at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, N.J., to help interpret environmental data compiled by the state.

Everyone involved in the process hopes that it can be completed before mid-February, when the school district must decide on whether to open the athletic fields for spring sports.

"We really need to know for scheduling," said Elmira schools superintendent Laura Sherwood. "It's a more complicated season than fall."

However, committee members said Monday that they don't want to jeopardize thoroughness by rushing the peer review of the state's findings.

■ **What's next:** Representatives from the state Department of Health will present information on its cancer cluster investigation and its in-depth study of the students with testicular cancer. The meeting will begin at 6 p.m. Nov. 27 at Southside High School, 777 S. Main St.

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Tue, Apr 16, 2019