

Editorial

Proceed with care

■ Southside cancer advisory committee should not rush to complete its review.

The investigation into cancer cases at Southside High School has some striking parallels to the vote recount in Florida. Some people are eager to bring them to a quick conclusion, so the community — in the case of Southside — and the nation — in the case of the presidential vote — can move on.

But others make equally compelling arguments that there should be no rush to judgment when dealing with matters such as what caused cancer in Southside students and whether Florida's vote was conducted fairly. That's not to suggest that the life-and-death implications at Southside and the future president are of equal importance. Ask the parents of those Southside children, and they'll emphasize that the health of their children ranks much higher than politics.

The passionate feelings explain why the Southside matter remains complicated, even after state health and environmental officials reported Monday that the latest round of soil samples on school grounds indicates there is no threat to students. With that finding, there may be the temptation in the community to stamp this case closed and walk away.

That would be a mistake. The special advisory committee studying the cancer concerns has not finished its work at Southside, where at least 22 current or former students have been confirmed to have the disease. Elmira school board members, who voted to close the Southside athletic fields on Aug. 29, have not received a recommendation from the advisory committee to reopen the fields. The fall sports season at Southside is over, and a decision to open the fields for spring athletic programs doesn't have to be made until February.

■ Committee has time to do its job.

The advisory committee, therefore, has three more months to review data and consider outside opinions, such as those being sought by the committee itself and by the Elmira school district. We hope that those reviews can be done by February, when the district would have to decide whether to reopen the fields or move Southside's sports teams to other sites — as was the case during the fall season.

When the board agreed in August to close the fields, we disagreed, citing a lack of reliable evidence at the time that the grounds were dangerous to students. However, now that the school has made it through the fall season and doesn't need the fields in the winter, there's no pressing need to reopen them.

The state has spent an estimated \$90,000 investigating and testing air and soil samples in and around the school. The results indicated that no contamination is coming in contact with students, even though the school was built 21 years ago on a polluted industrial site. However, the tests do not explain why many former and current students have come down with cancer and why there appears to be a higher-than-normal rate of testicular cancer among those students and graduates.

Without plausible answers to that mystery, no one can feel totally comfortable that this matter is closed. The advisory committee is under no deadline to finish its work, yet at some point, it must provide its conclusions to the board of education. When that occurs, the committee's findings, though they may not please everyone, need to be the product of a thorough and deliberative process.

And as long as there is time to do that, the committee has no reason to be hasty.

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Tue, Apr 16, 2019