Soil tests turn up more questions

CONCERN on the SOUTHSIDE

More information online

To read all of the Star-Gazette's coverage of the Southside cancer investigation, check out www.stargazette.com and click on Concern on the Southside.

■ Group aims to ensure investigations address its cancer concerns.

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Scientific uncertainty is the fuel driving a community panel to dig deeper into concerns about soil contamination at Southside High School.

Members of the Southside Advisory Committee are searching for definitive answers about whether more than a century of industrial activity on what is now the school property has caused the development of testicular cancer and other kinds of cancer among current and former students.

The New York state Department of Health has said the contamination at the school is buried beneath a one-foot layer of clean soil and does not pose a health risk to students or staff members.

But some scientists said defining what constitutes a health risk is not a simple task, and the advisory committee wants to ensure that enough information has been collected and thoroughly analyzed before accepting the state's conclusions.

The recommendations of federal and state agencies about acceptable soil contamination can vary.

For example:

■ The highest level of arsenic detected in the ground at Southside is 150 times greater than what is acceptable by the federal Environmental Protection Agency for residential areas.

■ The same sample of arsenic is 17 times greater than what the EPA recommends for an industrial area, where exposure would be for about eight hours a day for five days a week.

■ The highest arsenic level found at Southside is 7.5 times greater than the state Department of Environmental Conservation's recommended cleanup level. However, it won't be cleaned up because it is buried and people can't come in contact with it.

Such discrepancies don't necessarily reflect a significant variation in the health risk, said Rich Cahill, regional spokesman for the EPA.

Take, for instance, drinking water.

In New York, drinking water can contain only three parts per billion of certain organic compounds, Cahill said.

In many other states, drinking water is safe when the same chemicals do not exceed 50 parts per billion, which is the EPA's recommended level, Cahill said.

See SOIL/3C