

Panel: Develops plan of action

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in the Southside High School library. At that meeting, the committee hopes to have officials with the state Department of Environmental Conservation make a presentation about the most recent soil sample results and any future samples they may collect.

The DEC collected hundreds of soil samples at Southside High School that indicate the soil has been contaminated by more than a 100 years of heavy industrial activity.

The state Department of Health said during an Aug. 23 meeting that the level of contamination does not pose a health risk to students or staff at the school, 777 S. Main St.

State health officials said during the meeting that the overall cancer rate among current and former students was lower than what would be expected statistically, except for a group of students found to have testicular cancer since 1997.

However, several community members voiced doubts about those test results and demanded more tests be done on the school's athletic fields and a more comprehensive survey be conducted to locate any graduates who may have developed cancer.

In response to those concerns, the Elmira school board voted on Aug. 29 to close the athletic fields at the school and at nearby McNaught Field. The district, with the assistance of the committee, is also drafting a letter to send to students and graduates to inform them of the state's investigation.

In mid-September, engineers with the DEC collected 25 more soil samples from the football and soccer fields. The results of those tests are not expected to be available until mid-October, said Craig Slater, an environmental attorney from Buffalo, who was hired by the city of Elmira to oversee the state's investigation.

The state also collected air samples from a couple of subterranean classrooms at the request of a teacher who expressed concern at the Aug. 23 meeting. Those results are expected to be released in a few weeks, said Tony LaSorte, Schuyler-

"It has been a logistical nightmare since this (the closing of the athletic fields) occurred. If this continues into the spring, it's going to be a major problem."

James Palmer, Southside High School's athletic director and a member of the advisory committee

Chemung-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services health and safety officer.

Meinhardt gave an update on the health department's cancer cluster investigation.

At Meinhardt's urging, the state agreed to do a more thorough medical review of each testicular cancer patient who has attended the high school since 1997. The state will collect medical records of each young man from prenatal care to present conditions to determine whether there are any common threads among the men, Meinhardt said.

Meinhardt said she will ask state health officials to make a detailed presentation about the cancer cluster investigation at the committee's Nov. 13 meeting.

Slater and Rick Kennedy, an environmental attorney from Buffalo hired by the Elmira City School District, have also filed requests under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain copies of all state Department of Health and Department of Environmental Conservation reports relating to Southside High School.

The committee made it a top priority to obtain copies of all the state reports.

The committee also agreed to ask the state for an extension on the public comment period regarding the state health department's Health Consultation, a report that summarizes the cancer cluster investigation and the DEC's findings of soil, air and water tests at the school and adjacent properties.

The findings of the Health Consul-

tation report were presented during the Aug. 23 meeting. The public has until Oct. 15 to make any comments, including requests for additional testing or expanding the cancer cluster investigation into Southside neighborhoods. The committee said it will ask the state to extend the deadline for public comments until Dec. 1.

The extension will give the members time to review the most recent test results, which are not yet available. Members are also waiting for the state to release the full reports on soil sample data that were previously available just in summary form, Kennedy said.

The committee talked about the possibility of having an independent environmental company review the state's raw data and conclusions, but it did not take any formal action.

The 11 members of the group all voiced concern that action be taken as quickly as possible.

"It has been a logistical nightmare since this (the closing of the athletic fields) occurred," said James Palmer, the school's athletic director and a member of the committee.

"If this continues into the spring, it's going to be a major problem."

Student athletes are being bused to fields all over the area, and those who play at Chapel Park in Pine City have to change in trailers that have been brought in for them, Palmer said.

Palmer is a social studies teacher at Southside and is also the father of Josh Palmer, 20, a graduate who has developed Hodgkins disease.

He said he felt confident in the testing already completed by the state. However, another parent on the committee said the community would trust the results if an independent agency took soil samples and made the same conclusions.

"I think it would be beneficial to hire an independent company to do testing," said Julie Patros, a registered nurse and the mother of graduate Tom Patros, 21, who has testicular cancer.

"I think that the community doesn't feel it's getting adequate answers," Patros said. "The more eyes that look at this, the better."

Advisory committee members

■ **Craig Slater:** Co-chair and an environmental lawyer hired by the city of Elmira to oversee the state's investigation. Slater works for the law firm Harter, Secrest & Emery in Buffalo.

■ **Rick Kennedy:** Co-chair and an environmental lawyer hired by the Elmira City School District. Kennedy works for the law firm Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear in Buffalo.

■ **Dan Drake:** Town of Southport Recreation and Youth Services director and father of three current students at Southside High School.

■ **James Gillett:** Cornell University ecotoxicology professor. He is director of the Superfund basic research and education program at Cornell and has worked for the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

■ **Thomas Kump:** Director of environmental health for the Chemung County Department of Health and a former school board member. He holds a bachelor's degree in petroleum engineering and also serves as the county code enforcement officer.

■ **James Palmer:** A parent of a Southside High School graduate who has developed cancer; a social studies teacher and the director of athletics at Southside High School.

■ **Tony LaSorte:** Schuyler-Chemung-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services health and safety officer. With degrees in math and chemistry, he has 15 years as an industrial hygienist, one of only 6,000 certified in the country.

■ **Dr. Patricia Meinhardt:** Executive medical director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Arnot Ogden Medical Center in Elmira. She has specific expertise and experience in the diagnosis, management and prevention of the health effects of both acute and chronic occupational and environmental chemical exposure.

■ **Julie Patros:** A mother of a Southside High School student who has developed cancer, a registered nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira and a co-founder of the Southside Elmira environmental health for the Chemung County Department of Health monitoring the state's investigation.

■ **Tim Tobin:** A father of a current student at Southside High School who has cancer; a social studies teacher at Elmira Free Academy and a co-founder of SEEL.

■ **Laura Davies:** A senior at Southside High School, she is representing the student body.

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