Press & Sun-Bulletin January 2, 2005

Vestal mystery: Are vapors seeping into homes?; Scientists studying concentration of ground pollutants

VESTAL -- When Emil Bielecki jogs by a pump sucking chemical vapors from the ground on the west end of the Vestal Rail Trail, he often wonders about the extent of the pollution and its unseen impact on the area.

Could the pollution be causing problems like those in Endicott and Hillcrest, where fumes from subterranean pollution were pushing into basements through a process called vapor intrusion?

"It's important to be asking the question," said Bielecki, who is a member of the town board and a resident of Old Vestal Road, not far from the site.

Scientists from the federal Environmental Protection Agency are considering the same question, said Jim Haklar, a spokesman for the agency. They are monitoring data collected from water flowing below the Vestal site from an industrial park on Stage Road, next to the rail trail. The water flows southwest, under Route 17 and across Main Street, to a town well on Pumphouse Road, west of the Plantation House restaurant.

Efforts to clean the pollution have been continuous since the industrial park was listed as a federal Superfund site in 1982. More than 42 tons of contaminated soil have been removed from the industrial park, and a filter was placed on the municipal well.

In 2003, the EPA added the pump, called a vapor extraction unit, to suck chemicals from the ground. Passersby like Bielecki can hear its drone from within a shed clearly visible at the west end of the rail trail.

Recent samples from monitoring wells around the site show that trichlorethylene, the same chemical causing problems in Endicott and Hillcrest, is flowing through the ground at concentrations of less than 1 part per billion to 98 parts per billion in water between 25 and 100 feet below the ground.

The chemical, commonly used as a cleaning solvent by many industries, raises the risk of cancer and other illnesses in people exposed to enough of it.

Scientists are evaluating that data carefully, Haklar said. Based on current criteria, the site does not warrant a vapor intrusion study like the ones in Endicott or Hillcrest. But that could change.

"We're leaving the option open," he said. "The whole field of vapor intrusion is very new and it is changing constantly."

The discoveries in 2003 in Endicott and 2004 in Hillcrest ran contrary to conventional belief, held for decades, that industrial solvents from a bygone era were trapped in the ground at levels too low to affect homes.

But vapor intrusion studies are costly and they can stigmatize neighborhoods, so they are not undertaken without careful evaluation.

Many Vestal residents have been keenly following developments in Endicott, Bielecki said, but have not considered the effects of pollution on the south side of the Susquehanna River.

Several of Bielecki's neighbors interviewed would welcome a study that sheds more light on the extent and nature of the pollution coming from the industrial park on Stage Road.

"We would want to know what is here," said Debbie Buchek, who lives near Bielecki on Old Vestal Road.

The Denver Post January 27, 2005

Neighbors stoic about revised cleanup plans

Residents of a southeast Denver neighborhood reacted stoically to revised plans presented at a meeting Wednesday for environmental cleanup and air testing near the former Redfield rifle scope factory.

There was little questioning of loosened standards for the presence of one chemical from about 35 residents. Nor was any criticism expressed during the hour-long presentation at the Rocky Mountain School for Expeditionary Learning.

One woman, who declined to give her name, did say at the end of the meeting that she wondered how much the decision to relax the standard was driven by Washington, because she believes the current administration is no friend of clean air.

State health officials are weakening the cleanup threshold for 1,1 dichloroethylene (DCE), a vapor once found seeping into more than 300 homes in near the Redfield plant.

"We are convinced that (the old state action level) was more conservative than it needed to be," said Gary Baughman, director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's hazardous-materials and waste-management division.

Health officials said they don't anticipate the new action level for DCE to affect any state-led cleanups, but it could influence ongoing indoor air testing near the former Redfield plant.

For years, chemical waste seeped beneath the factory at 5800 E. Jewell Ave., creating a plume of solvent-contaminated groundwater that spread into the surrounding neighborhood. The tainted water, environmental regulators say, filled basements with chemical vapors, including DCE.

Brown Group Retail Inc., Click for Enhanced Coverage Linking Searches which owns the former site and is overseeing cleanup, has spent more than $12 million on the project, including installing 381 ventilation systems in the Cook Park neighborhood and cleaning up groundwater.

Brown submitted a revised testing and cleanup plan - based on the new DCE action level - to state environmental regulators earlier this week, and shared it with residents Wednesday.

One audience member Wednesday night questioned the timetable for implementing the new plan, and was told it wasn't certain but could begin within a month.

If the state approves the plan, the company may no longer be responsible for maintaining ventilation systems in about 150 homes where DCE levels have tested below the revised level.

Brown spokeswoman Lisa Sigler said the new threshold will actually cost the company "a great deal of money" because of tests and work that will now have to be done.

"But our focus is really on cleaning up the groundwater in this neighborhood, not the money," she said.

Jan Belmear, who lives near the former Redfield site, said she intends to keep her ventilation system turned on even though she doesn't worry about toxic fumes.

"Some people I know will be keeping them because they also detect radon," said Belmear.

While the the state's new threshold for the level of airborne DCE that must be present before cleanup is warranted is still tougher than what the EPA says is necessary, it's about 10 times less stringent than the old state standard.

The EPA once considered DCE a possible carcinogen, but in 2002 backed off and proposed cleanup guidelines that were significantly weaker than what Colorado regulators had been enforcing.

State officials have since re- evaluated the studies used in crafting the original threshold and have adopted a less stringent action level that they say is still safe for people.

Also affecting the Redfield site is the state's decision in August to strengthen indoor air cleanup levels for trichloroethylene, or TCE, which has also been detected in the groundwater underneath the site.

If TCE vapors are detected in homes that are currently not ventilated, and the vapors are shown to be coming from the groundwater, Brown will offer to install a new system.

David Folkes, a principal with Envirogroup Limited, said the groundwater cleanup is well underway but years from being complete.

"I don't know exactly when (the cleanup) will be done," he said, "but progress is certainly being made."

Kathy Hesse, of the 1500 block of South Leyden Street, said the new DCE standard won't affect her home in the short run.

"I think it's kind of promising. We're making progress," Hesse said after the meeting.

Elaine Plym, of the 1500 block of South Jasmine Street, said she's always viewed the cleanup with suspicion, and said "I appreciated the candor of the state, and the honesty" when a health department toxicologist told the gathering that not enough research has been done on DCE or TCE to speak definitively about the substances' long-term carcinogenic effect.

Press & Sun-Bulletin January 30, 2005

Pollution tests stepped up at 50 Hillcrest houses; Officials seek to pinpoint source

HILLCREST -- Scientists and technicians are working inside and outside of houses to find and clean industrial pollution in Hillcrest, as an investigation sparked by a rash of childhood cancers enters its eighth year.

Contractors working for the state Department of Environmental Conservation are in the process of taking indoor air samples in about 50 houses, according to Thomas Suozzo, a scientist for the DEC. More houses may be tested later this winter.

Meanwhile, representatives from CAE Electronics and Triple Cities Metal Finishing are testing and designing methods to remove a subterranean plume of gaseous solvents coming from factories on Nowlan Road.

Scientists must assess more precisely where the vapors are coming from before they can determine a comprehensive strategy to clean them, Suozzo said. The cleanup plan has three main aspects:

* Installing systems to ventilate trichloroethylene (TCE) vapors from under tainted buildings, based on a case-by-case evaluation.

* Installing a vacuum system to pull TCE vapors from under the former metal plating factory. This would prevent vapors from traveling through a porous layer of soil into surrounding properties.

* Treating polluted groundwater flowing from under the former CAE Electronics site with a substance that will eliminate TCE. Contractors for Triple Cities Metal Finishing will install the vacuum, called a vapor extraction system, to suck out relatively high concentrations of TCE gases discovered under the plant last year, Suozzo said. But first, DEC scientists want to evaluate results of indoor air samples at some nearby buildings to see to what degree they are affected by gases from under the metal plating factory.

TCE gases could be moving from the metal plating plant to surrounding property through a permeable layer of soil, he said. Or the solvent, used widely by many industries, could be

evaporating from contaminated groundwater coming from under the former CAE site, now occupied by Elliott Manufacturing.

It also is possible TCE pollution could be coming from another, undetermined source, he said.

"We want to make sure we understand the source, and once we do that, see how best to address it," Suozzo said.

Joe Morgan, president of Triple Cities Metal Finishing, said the company is taking its own tests to confirm results found by the DEC.

"If we have the same results the DEC has, we will put a system in," he said.

The metal plating company moved its operations to Kirkwood Industrial Park in 2000, leaving the Hillcrest plant vacant.

Results from indoor air tests are expected in four to six weeks, Suozzo said.

Researchers took samples from 28 houses in March, after a preliminary study found TCE gases in the soil. TCE was detected in 13 of 28 indoor air samples, ranging from 0.86 to 26 micrograms per cubic meter of air. Health officials determined ventilation systems were needed in three of the homes, and as many as 100 more would need testing.

The cold weather is an effective time to test, because pollution is more likely to get pulled into homes from outside soil when furnaces are on and windows and doors are shut.

State health and environmental officials began checking pollution in the small suburban neighborhood in 1998, after at least six children were diagnosed with cancer. To date, officials from the Department of Health have not found a cause.

Herald News February 1, 2005

Dry cleaner site toxic, DEP confirms; Extent of contamination in neighborhood eyed

Environmental regulators have confirmed that the ground around a former dry cleaning establishment is polluted with a toxic chemical and are checking nearby homes to determine the extent of the contamination.

The discovery could also affect the hotly debated construction of townhouses on a nearby ball field.

Studies released in November found high levels of the dry cleaning solvent perchloroethylene, also known as perc or PCE, in soil and groundwater near the Topps Cleaners on Fair Lawn Avenue. PCE was also detected in sections of the Archery Plaza soccer field south of the dry cleaner property.

Because of the levels of PCE and direction of groundwater flow, the state Department of Environmental Protection has asked for additional testing of air quality and groundwater in a strip of 11 homes along Plaza Road, DEP spokesman Fred Mumford said.

Mumford said the PCE level was high enough to prompt the DEP to act quickly but had not yet been found to be an immediate health risk.

"Until you get more data, you can't say too much," Mumford said.

Mumford said that the consultants had until March 4 to submit additional plans and that testing would likely be done this summer. Representatives of DEP began contacting residents of the homes, which are in the Radburn community, this week.

Though contamination at the cleaners had been detected as far back as 1993, the current probe didn't start until 2003 and was apparently triggered by litigation by the Radburn Association of homeowners against the owners of the Topps property. The Topps owners are John O'Hara Jr., Emmaline O'Hara, Thomas O'Hara and Joan O'Hara.

The Radburn Association, which owns Archery Plaza, hired lawyers to confront the Topps owners in 1998 after PCE, presumably from Topps, was discovered during groundwater tests related to a spill at a nearby lot known as Hayward Field.

The Topps owners settled with the association for approximately $100,000 in 2002, according to Radburn residents, and the Topps cleanup was made a condition of the settlement, Radburn attorney Michael Ferro said. The current testing is a prelude to that cleanup.

Reactions by homeowners to news of the contamination ranged from concern to resignation.

Kathy Moore said she worried her 10-year-old daughter's stomach pains could be related to pollution. She said she and her family weren't advised about possible contamination when they bought their house about four years ago.

"The people we bought our house from never mentioned Hayward (Field)," Moore said. "I'm wondering if they even knew about Archery Plaza."

Dolores Bordonaro also said this was the first she had heard of the contamination at Topps and Archery, and said Archery Plaza had been a favorite play field for her four children.

"We bought this house because of the field in the back," Bordonaro said.

Though reactions to the pollution varied, one aspect many residents embraced was its possible effect on a proposal to build 175 townhouses on nearby Hayward Field and Daly Field.

Plans for the townhouses, announced last year, have angered residents concerned about the loss of green space and crowding. The Borough Council has also publicly opposed the development

and recently commissioned studies of both the Topps property and Archery Plaza as possible elements of alternative developments.

Borough Manager Joanne Kwasniewski said the contamination could stop or complicate development plans.

"You have to have remediation on any (contaminated) site," Kwasniewski said. "You can't develop until you reach a point that DEP says you can."

Topps had been a fixture in Fair Lawn from the 1950s until its closing in the fall of 2004.

Borough and DEP officials said the main threat to residents from any PCE pollution is from vapors collecting in homes. PCE vapors are described as having a sharp, sweet smell.

The chemical, used widely as a dry cleaning solvent and industrial degreaser, is classified as a likely carcinogen, and high levels of exposure can cause neurological and other health problems.

Borough officials said the contamination would not affect drinking water. There are no drinking water wells within a mile of Topps, Public Works Superintendent Ron Conte said.

Press & Sun-Bulletin February 8, 2005

TCE standard stricter downstate; Tier residents upset

Stricter guidelines are being applied to protect residents from exposure to underground pollution in East Fishkill than in Endicott and Hillcrest, and members of the Southern Tier communities are unhappy about it.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency announced last week an acceptable exposure limit of trichloroethylene (TCE) gases for East Fishkill residents of 0.38 micrograms per cubic meter of indoor air -- at or near the limits of detection.

In Endicott, Hillcrest and other Southern Tier communities being evaluated by the state Department of Health, the guideline is 5 micrograms per cubic meter -- more than 10 times greater than the federal goal being used in East Fishkill.

Cleanup at the East Fishkill site, which officials suspect was polluted by a manufacturer of metal cabinets, is being overseen by the EPA. Sites with similar pollution, from other sources, in Endicott and Hillcrest are being overseen by the state Department of Health.

The differing standards are the latest signs of a growing national debate about how much TCE is too much. Stakeholders include Southern Tier residents living in neighborhoods where the solvent is moving through the ground and forming gases pushing into basements through a process called vapor intrusion.

"The people close to this just can't afford to wait while it is being studied and studied," said Dan Lamb, a spokesman for Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey, D-Hurley, an advocate for strict TCE standards nationally.

TCE has been linked to health risks ranging from brain damage to cancer for people exposed to enough of it. The levels found in Southern Tier homes are generally low, but scientists say they don't know the consequences of breathing the fumes for years or decades.

In Endicott, IBM Corp. has installed systems to divert the gases from more than 430 buildings. But that number could grow if guidelines change.

Testing is being done this winter to determine how many houses near similar sites in Hillcrest, Johnson City and Binghamton are affected.

Affected residents are urging government agencies to adopt strict and consistent standards to deal with the problem. They wonder why the state Department of Health would allow residents to be exposed to more TCE than the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"It does not give me confidence in the state," said Bruce Oldfield, a Hillcrest resident. "We want this done right and done right the first time. ... I don't understand it. It's arbitrary."

Mark Jaros, a member of a citizens group working with agencies to address pollution in Endicott and the Town of Union, said the state Department of Health has been unresponsive to the community's plight.

"Every single concern, the state has brushed off," he said.

That assessment was reflected by other residents interviewed Monday.

"We have nobody watching out for our best interest," said Bernadette Patrick, an advocate involved with the Endicott cleanup.

Representatives from the state Department of Health had no comment Monday afternoon.

Lamb said a recent policy set for the EPA's Region II, which includes all of the state, was an encouraging sign because it may set a precedent that would provide leverage for a stricter standard in Endicott and other places in the Southern Tier that are now using the more lax state guideline.

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WHY IT MATTERS

Governmental guidelines for acceptable levels of TCE exposure in homes will determine the size and scope of many Southern Tier environmental cleanup projects. Residents of say stricter standards mean safer neighborhoods.

Press & Sun-Bulletin February 12, 2005

THE ENDICOTT SPILLS - N.Y.: TCE standards are too lax; State is inconsistent at Huron, IBM says

:

ENDICOTT -- Federal occupational safety regulations are insufficient protection for workers at the former IBM plant on North Street who might unknowingly face exposure to chemicals from underground pollution, according to a state health official.

That is why the state is spending $250,000 to retest the 63-building campus this month, according to Gary Litwin, director of the state Department of Health's Bureau of Environmental Exposure Investigation.

Officials at the state Department of Health are trying to minimize public exposure to tricholoroethylene (TCE) and other chemicals pooled under the plant and flowing into the village, Litwin said.

"If you have people in there and they are not working with TCE, they should not be expected to be exposed to TCE," Litwin said. The chemical was once used extensively in the circuit board assembly process as a cleaning agent, but has been phased out.

The latest round of testing at Huron, which began last week and is expected to continue through the month, may put to rest what many advocates have been asking for more than two years: Are any of the 3,600 people working at the Huron campus, formerly the heart of IBM's manufacturing operations, exposed to pollution from a plume of TCE and other chemicals affecting hundreds of properties to the south?

Two years of comprehensive testing in a 300-acre section south of the plant found the chemicals were forming gases and pushing into buildings through a process known as vapor intrusion. IBM Corp., which is cleaning the pollution under a state mandate, has installed systems to divert the fumes from more than 430 buildings.

The plant, which IBM sold to Huron Real Estate Associates in 2002, was tested by IBM in 2001 and 2002. Each time chemicals, when found at all, fell well under limits set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

But the testing, geared toward federal guidelines, lacked the necessary refinement to offer a complete picture, Litwin said. The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration's limit for acceptable TCE exposure, for example, is thousands of times greater than a guideline the state established for exposure to the chemical in other settings.

IBM spokesman Todd Martin said Friday the OSHA guidelines provide sufficient safeguards for people at the plant.

"That's their mission, to assure the safety and health of America's workers by setting and enforcing standards," he said, referring to OHSA's mission statement.

The state is unfairly applying inconsistent rules to IBM, he added, citing an instance in East Fishkill where TCE pollution, thought to be coming from a cabinet maker, is affecting nearby buildings. In that case, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has said any detectable amounts of TCE entering buildings is unacceptable and must be addressed. Nationally, the EPA is yet to adopt a guideline.

In Endicott, the state Department of Health is allowing no more than 5 micrograms of TCE per cubic meter of air to enter homes and nearby buildings -- 100,000 times less than the OSHA limit. The health agency is applying that limit -- adopted as statewide guideline in October of 2003 -- to the Huron campus.

"This inconsistency is unfair to communities, employers, employees and regulating entities," Martin said Friday.

Litwin sees it another way: Occupational exposure risks acceptable for a person knowingly working with chemicals in a manufacturing setting should not apply to other people, including people in nearby offices or work spaces.

Scott Lauffer, an environmental advocate and longtime employee at the North Street campus, is one of those people. Lauffer, a computer programmer, is also chairman of the local chapter of the Sierra Club. He agrees that more testing is a good thing.

"Let's see what the numbers say," he said. "We are hoping for the best, that nobody is being exposed."

Results are expected in April or May, said Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer with the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"IBM has been and will continue to comply with all laws and regulations governing the workplace," Martin said. "We are proud of our long-term commitment to the health and well-being of our employees."

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: What are OSHA standards?

Answer: The federal government sets acceptable risks for workers on the job through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The standards balance worker safety with economic feasibility.

Q: What standard is the state using?

A: The state has adopted a general limit of 5 micrograms of tricholoroethylene per cubic meter of indoor air -- thousands of times lower than the OSHA standard.

Q: What did previous tests show?

A: Samples collected in 2001 in two of the 63 office buildings showed the highest reading of TCE: 4 micrograms per cubic meter. A report from IBM concluded that low levels of this and other chemicals were not from pollution beneath the building.

In 2002, five of 85 samples were found to have chemicals above the level of detection, and all were well below OSHA limits. TCE was not detected, but the level of detection was set too high to be useful in determining the impact of pollution from under the plant, state Department of Health officials said.

The New York Post February 13, 2005

IN A SEEP OF TROUBLE ; DEADLY TOXINS A PERIL AT 14 SITES

In a stunning miscalculation, 421 contaminated sites across the state - including 14 in the city - designated safe by environmental officials are now feared to be leaching deadly chemicals into schools, homes and other buildings nearby.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation is now launching a mammoth effort to retest the sites, re-clean them if necessary, and inform residents if toxins have breached their homes and schools.

The faulty calculations, which originated at the federal level, led state officials to believe it was more difficult for chemical vapors to move through soil and into buildings than it actually is.

"The models applied in the past under-predicted the potential that [toxins] could emerge and get into indoor spaces," said DEC Commissioner for Air and Waste Management Carl Johnson.

In addition, new toxicity information has shown two chemicals - trichloroethene, or TCE, and tetrachloroethene, or PERC - were more dangerous than previously thought.

This means that for thousands of people around the state, their risk of everything from respiratory ailments to cancer has just become more extreme.

The DEC wants to retest 421 sites - including 14 in the city - because of their concentration of TCE and PERC or their proximity to schools and homes.

The agency won't say when the air and soil testing will begin but has said it may call on owners of the contaminated sites to pay for the retesting and additional costly cleaning - even though they were told their cleanup work was done.

"They are opening a big can of worms," said James Periconi, former chair of the environmental-law section of the state Bar Association, who predicted a raft of lawsuits from property owners unwilling to do more clean-up and homeowners exposed to toxins.

The 14 city sites include six adjacent to homes and two near or below schools.

On 99th Street in Ozone Park, Queens, PS 65 sits across the street from a former manufacturer of airplane parts that spilled hundreds of gallons of TCE, a degreaser and carcinogen, into the ground.

The area was cleaned and tested, but as the state has learned, there could still be toxins rising into the school.

"That's very scary," said Jackie Mendez, who was picking up her niece Jennifer. "The testing should be done quickly so it doesn't hurt the kids."

At Holy Child Church on Staten Island, which runs a preschool and sits atop another prioritized site with TCE and other chemical contamination, parishioners were looking for answers.

"I've always been worried about it," said Annette Hernandez, who also lives next to the site. "But they did some work on it and said everything was fine."

The miscalculation first became apparent at a site in Colorado five years ago, where, based on scientific modeling, officials believed there was no threat of vapor intrusion. Testing in the field proved otherwise.

The issue hit closer to home in 2003 in upstate Endicott, where the DEC similarly found the modeling was wrong at a site contaminated with industrial waste from an IBM plant.

The DEC is the first state environmental agency in the nation to take such a sweeping approach to retesting sites.

For NYPD Detective Leo Pereyra, the DEC's proactive approach just means more bad news.

Pereyra and his family bought their house in Glendale, Queens, a year and a half ago.

A guilt-ridden real-estate agent told them after closing that a former drycleaning warehouse next door had leaked perhaps thousands of gallons of PERC - a carcinogenic chemical - into the ground and under his home.

Pereyra had equipment installed in November 2003 in his basement to vent vapors collecting there. With news of retesting at the site of the spill, he's unsure if the equipment is doing the job.

"We felt comfortable because we installed the system," he said. "My wife is pregnant now with our second child. Now this is starting all over again. Is this system doing its job or are we being exposed again?"

The state DEC says it used faulty testing standards to determine if some toxins buried in the ground are dangerous. The agency says these 14 formerly contaminated sites in NYC may still be exposing nearby residents to serious health risks.

* 421 sites have been prioritized in the state, including 14 in the city

* Six city sites are near or below homes

* Two sites are near or below schools

* Two sites have already shown vapor intrusion problems

* The contaminants of most concern are TCE, a degreaser, and PERC, a dry-cleaning chemical, both of which are colorless and odorless carcinogens

Press & Sun-Bulletin February 23, 2005

TOXIC INTRUDER - State seeks public input on fighting fumes

State health officials want to know how well they are addressing gases from underground chemicals affecting hundreds and perhaps thousands of people in the Southern Tier and the state.

The State Department of Health is seeking public comments on the agency's approach, Rob Kenny, a spokesman for the agency said Tuesday. A draft of a state guideline, available beginning today on the agency's Web site, details the state's policy to identify, investigate and respond to the problem known as vapor intrusion.

The problem stems from a class of chemicals, called volatile organic compounds, at hundreds of sites throughout the state, including those in Endicott, Hillcrest, Vestal, Binghamton and Norwich. The chemicals, once used as cleaning agents by many industries, are forming gases that can seep into basements and circulate through buildings.

Bruce Oldfield, a Hillcrest resident and health and environmental advocate, questioned the sincerity of the state's request for constructive criticism.

"Often our opinions are solicited, but not acted upon," said Oldfield, a member of a citizens group called the Hillcrest Environmental Action Team. "We'd like to know that this is going to be fruitful."

Kinny said the Department of Health "takes all comments into consideration."

The request for comments, which will last for 60 days, concerns how the state is addressing fumes from three chemicals: trichloro-ethylene (TCE); perchloroethylene (PCE); and trichloroethane (TCA). They have been linked to increased risk of illnesses ranging from rashes to cancer in people exposed to enough, although state and federal scientists are still debating what exposure limits are allowable and feasible.

Many advocates have criticized the state for changing its approach to cleaning TCE after the solvent was discovered affecting hundreds of Endicott properties in 2003. At first, the state and IBM Corp. -- the company responsible for the pollution -- agreed to clean any detectable levels of the solvent from homes. That guideline was changed to 5 micrograms of TCE per cubic meter of air in October of that year.

The state is monitoring property with lower concentrations.

The state's approach in Endicott has been "a mixed bag," according to Lenny Siegel, executive director of The Center for Public Environmental Oversight, a research and advocacy group in Mountain View, Calif.

On the one hand, the state Health Department was responsive to addressing the problem before it was fully understood.

On the other, the agency lacked a clear policy and direction in dealing with the issue over the long run.

"They moved quickly, but not real carefully. But because of that, they were able to vent several hundred homes," he said.

Oldfield said the state is lagging behind other states.

Why it Matters

The state's policy on vapor intrusion affects people and businesses in polluted areas and industries responsible for cleaning sites. Stakeholders also include taxpayers paying to clean sites where no responsible party can be identified.

To date, the state has spent more than $1 million in Superfund money, mostly in the last year, to track VOC pollution in the county. Private industry, including IBM Corp. in Endicott and CAE Electronics and Triple Cities Metal Finishing in Hillcrest, has spent millions more.

The Ithaca Journal February 23, 2005

DEC alters posture on Emerson

ITHACA - The Department of Environmental Conservation has reclassified the Emerson Power Transmission factory cleanup site as a 'significant threat to the environment.'

The DEC changed the site from a Class 4 - a site that has been properly closed but requires continued maintenance and/or monitoring - to a Class 2.

The announcement was buried in the notification for a public meeting on the factory.

The new designations signifies that "hazardous waste constitutes a significant threat to the environment," according to the DEC Web site.

Timothy Weber, one of the managers of a Internet listserv for concerned residents living near the site, said the announcement wasn't a surprise to him but he found the means of announcing it less than forthcoming.

"We want the appearance of progress as much as progress," Weber said. "We're part of the process and we need to know what's happening."

Many involved with the investigation and remediation at Emerson don't expect reclassification to change much of what is happening there. What the new status does provide is a financial safety net for the project. Should Emerson in the future decide it no longer wants to fund the cleanup, the state would now be able to access its Superfund money to clean up the site.

"It's certainly more common to go from a (Class) 2 to a (Class) 4," said Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer in the DEC's Syracuse office. "Typically it's new information that makes the classification from (Class) 4 to (Class) 2 happen."

In Emerson's case, the first new information to affect the site was a consultant's findings last spring during its monitoring of tricholorethylene, or TCE, at the plant.

TCE was a solvent used by the former Morse Chain plant to degrease chains made at the factory. The chemical can cause nerve damage, dizziness and headaches if inhaled in large quantities. Consultants found levels as high as 28,000 parts per billion in December of 2003. The state cleanup standard is anything above five parts per billion.

Since then, 49 homes have been tested to see if TCE vapors have infiltrated homes downhill from the plant and more than one has received a vapor mitigation system from Emerson due to TCE levels.

"I think reclassification is a good idea so we'll get a full investigation of what went on at the plant in terms of pollution," said Peter Glick, who lives on Park Street, just outside the zone where homes are being tested.

David Baldridge, spokesperson for Emerson, said that Emerson doesn't expect any changes in its commitment to the site with reclassification. He added that the company plans to continue cooperating with the DEC on any investigation or remediation that is needed.

The IBM plant in Endicott is one of the few other sites in the state where such a reclassification, from a Class 4 to a Class 2, has occurred

The Record April 10, 2005

Poisons hit home; New Awareness of pollution's reach; Dangerous vapors can foul indoor air

New Jersey's toxic legacy has taken a new turn: Hazardous chemicals are migrating far beyond polluted sites, contaminating the air inside homes and businesses.

Fumes - from dry-cleaning fluids, degreasing solvents, gasoline and other chemicals - are rising up through cracks in foundations and seeping into homes around utility pipes. In a state with more than 15,500 known polluted sites, where virtually every community has an old gas station or some other tainted property, the vapors are raising new questions about the risks of living near contamination.

"Indoor air quality is going to be huge over the next year or two," said Robert Spiegel, executive director of the Edison Wetlands Association, an environmental group that works with neighbors of contaminated land. "As people move into New Jersey, buy these homes, put their kids into these homes and day-care centers built on toxic plumes, we foresee this as a train wreck that is unavoidable."

In North Jersey, the state has ordered testing in two Fair Lawn neighborhoods where fumes from dry-cleaning chemicals and a gas spill could be seeping into homes.

And in Edgewater, the EPA announced last week that it would sample the air at a child-care center and offices along River Road. An oil recycler that formerly operated there unleashed a plume of hazardous chemicals that has spread underneath the buildings.

Elsewhere in New Jersey, noxious fumes have already turned up inside some properties:

*-Forty-six families were relocated and a public housing complex in Long Branch was demolished last year after tests discovered long-buried contamination leaking vapors into the building. Tenants had complained of headaches, high cancer rates and other ills, though the state Health Department cast doubt on such claims.

*-Low levels of hazardous chemicals were discovered in the air at an Edison day-care center two years ago. The landlord installed a ventilation system - technology that has become common for new buildings in the area to prevent air contamination.

*-The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tested the air inside 250 Wall Township buildings over a massive plume of leaked dry-cleaning fluid - and ordered ventilation systems in 27 homes and businesses in 2001. Officials call it one of the largest indoor air investigations in the history of the Superfund program.

Similar problems have been discovered around the nation. In Denver, vapors were found inside more than 300 homes near a factory that polluted the groundwater with degreasing chemicals. In upstate New York, environmental officials have found fumes in hundreds of homes near an old IBM plant. The discovery convinced the state to order vapor tests at more than 400 properties around New York, including some already declared clean.

Concerned about the dangers, New Jersey, the federal government and several other states are considering ways to toughen cleanup requirements for toxic sites. New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection may follow New York's lead by examining properties that have already been cleaned up. In the meantime, the DEP says it's reducing the risk by expanding individual cleanups and curtailing some development plans.

"The steps we've taken so far give us the confidence to say this is not a big issue," said Joseph Seebode, an assistant commissioner at the DEP. "There are sites where you could not build over them without addressing indoor air problems. We seek first and always to try to remediate these sites."

A rush to reuse

Not all contaminated sites pose indoor air dangers. But the potential risk is high, environmentalists say, because of New Jersey's rush to clean toxic sites so the property can be used for housing, schools and shops. New Jersey has perhaps 10,000 such "brownfields," the DEP says.

Even property declared clean may pose problems. At almost 900 sites, the DEP has allowed pollutants to be left in the ground after landowners showed the contamination would not affect people or the environment. The chemicals are left to dilute naturally over time. But new research shows hazardous vapors can travel farther than once thought - and with more harmful consequences.

The process experts call "vapor intrusion" begins with contaminated soil or water below the surface. Plumes of tainted groundwater can carry chemicals miles underground, well beyond the boundaries of a polluted property. The compounds evaporate and rise through gaps between soil particles, pool under foundation slabs or in crawl spaces, and seep into buildings through cracks or around utility pipes. Some of the fumes are odorless. Others have a sweet smell that people may become so accustomed to that they stop noticing it.

In many cases, levels inside a building are too low to harm anyone, state officials say. But the fear is that vapors can accumulate over years, and that long-term low-level exposures can be dangerous.

Experts worry most about volatile organic compounds, a class of chemicals that vaporize easily and are common in contaminated sites around the nation. The most widespread are industrial and dry-cleaning solvents such as trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene. At high levels, the chemicals can cause lung, kidney and liver damage, headaches and dizziness. They may also increase cancer risks.

Often, levels are tiny, impossible to separate from the stew of fumes from household cleaners, dry-cleaned clothing and other chemicals found in homes. Even where vapors are abundant, they can be removed with ventilation systems, much like those used in homes with radon problems.

But that's little comfort to Fair Lawn residents like Don Borodkin, who's about to learn whether pollutants have been seeping into his home.

"It was a stark realization for me and several other neighbors along the block," said Borodkin, whose Plaza Road home is one of 11 soon to be tested. "The potential for a serious problem is there."

The homes back onto Archery Plaza, a ballfield believed to have been contaminated by the Topps dry-cleaning business, now defunct. Tests have found TCE and tetrachlorethylene in groundwater there.

In January, the DEP wrote to neighbors to say it would test for indoor fumes. A contractor will sample soil near the homes this year. If levels are high enough to create vapor problems, workers will drill holes in Borodkin's basement and check for gases.

Borodkin said he's concerned, but "not hysterical."

"I'm sort of playing middle of the road on this and waiting to see what the numbers are," said Borodkin, 58, an office-products salesman whose parents bought the house in the 1950s. "I grew up here, I played touch football in the field in the 1950s and 1960s. I'm still alive and kicking."

Across town, air tests are slated for three homes along Fourth Street. They sit atop a pool of gasoline-tainted groundwater traced to a nearby school bus depot. State officials say the plume may be emitting MTBE, a fuel additive that causes nausea, nose and throat irritation and neurological problems in people, and cancer in animals.

The concerns go beyond health, said William Dimin, a lawyer representing the homeowners.

"You think about this logically - is anyone going to want to buy a home where there's a contamination problem underground?" he asked.

The plume runs about 20 feet below the basements, said Dave Gurgel, president of Energy for America, the engineering firm leading the cleanup.

"It's so far underground that I don't think the levels will be a problem," he said. "But it's not an exact science. We'll have to see."

In Edgewater, the EPA will begin multiple rounds of air tests this summer at a child-care center and office complex next to a River Road Superfund site. A plume of arsenic, lead and PCBs released by a former tar-processing and oil-recycling business has spread under the neighboring buildings.

Tests in 2002 found no air problems at the Palisades Child Care Center. But vapor levels can change over time and with the seasons, noted Richard Ho, the EPA project manager for the cleanup at the Quanta Resources site. "We want to go in there and do some more thorough testing," he said.

Tom Hegney, who owns the office complex, said the previous test at the day-care center, combined with years of tests at the Quanta site itself, show the area is safe.

"I wouldn't put anybody there if there was any question," he said.

New awareness

Regulators say they are only now beginning to understand the potential scope of the problem.

"As of two years ago, really no one was looking at vapor intrusion. We just weren't thinking about it," said Jim Moore, an Army Corps of Engineers project manager. He is overseeing the cleanup at the Edison site, the Raritan Center.

The center is a sprawling complex of offices and warehouses built on a former Army base, where used munitions and chemical spills fouled soil and water. After the corps announced two years ago that it would leave some pollution on the site, the owners of one of the new buildings tested the air. In the basement of the Peppermint Tree Nursery School, they found traces of tetrachloroethylene.

The landlord added a ventilation system, and subsequent checks have found no chemicals above government limits, Moore said. The technology, he argued, means vapor intrusion will be only a minor issue for future cleanups.

"I don't think it's a ticking time bomb," he said.

Spiegel and other activists disagree. "Indoor air pollution is a risk, and they don't know enough about it to say how bad a risk it is," Spiegel said. "We're essentially experimenting with the general public by putting homes and schools and day-care centers on these sites."

The growing concerns about vapors follow an August 2001 draft report by the EPA that warned of newly discovered risks from trichloroethylene. It found TCE "highly likely" to cause kidney, liver, cervical and other cancers - at exposures much lower than previously thought safe.

The report recommended tighter federal standards for the chemical, a change that could force costlier cleanups of TCE-tainted properties. But the EPA has yet to strengthen the standards.

Industrial users have challenged the data, as has the Pentagon, which owns many sites with TCE pollution. "They built in every conservative assumption they absolutely could about the chemical in terms of [human] metabolism, in terms of exposure," said Steve Risotto, executive director of the Halogenated Solvents Industry Alliance, which represents TCE makers. "You sort of pile up

every conservative assumption, and pretty soon you wind up with an ultraconservative risk analysis."

Although there are uncertainties, the government needs a stricter federal standard, said Daniel Wartenberg, a TCE researcher at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

"The evidence strongly suggests that there are carcinogenic risks, and that needs to be addressed and addressed aggressively," he said, adding, "If I were moving into a brownfield, I'd want to know more about that: Is it there now? What are the concentrations?"

Assessing risk is difficult, however. New York officials have found that deeply buried pollutants can have an impact even when computer models suggest otherwise, said Maureen Wren, a spokeswoman with New York's Department of Environmental Conservation.

"We are seeing vapor intrusion, albeit at very low levels, in conditions in which the models would have predicted it would not occur," she said.

Meanwhile, the EPA's 2001 analysis recommended setting acceptable levels of TCE so low that most of today's testing equipment would not detect it. Tests also have to separate the fumes of underground contamination from carpet glues, paint removers, construction materials, cigarette smoke and automobile exhaust inside homes.

Tenants sue

State environmental officials have not definitively traced any illnesses to vapor intrusion. In Long Branch, however, former tenants of the Seaview Manor apartments blame toxic fumes for high cancer rates, respiratory ills and developmental problems among children in their Jersey Shore neighborhood. Nearly 400 families have sued New Jersey Natural Gas, which they fault for the contamination

Julia Wheeler, a 72-year-old former tenant, wonders if fumes had anything to do with her 18-year-old daughter's death from lupus, an immune system disorder. Wheeler, head of a citizens group that pushed for a cleanup of the site, said odors around the apartments and a nearby stream got worse about six years ago, after digging began to remove dirt contaminated with benzene and other compounds.

"It smelled like rotten eggs mixed with oil, an awful smell," she said. "You can still smell it."

Part of the complex was built atop land once owned by a gas manufacturing plant that closed in the 1950s. Recent tests found volatile organic compounds and other chemicals in the ground and water - and in vapors in the crawl space below some apartments.

Although chemicals were in the building, the levels were so low that they were unlikely to cause harm, the state Health Department concluded in a 2004 report. Still, heavy rains and floods during testing meant that the samples "may not represent a worst-case scenario," the report

added. The department's 2003 review of cancer rates found "little evidence" that exposure had increased the incidence of cancer.

"The testing to date has found no health concerns related to the property," said Roseanne Koberle, a spokeswoman for New Jersey Natural Gas. Nevertheless, the company agreed to knock down the apartments, remove truckloads of tainted soil - and make way for new housing.

The New Seaview Manor should be finished next year. "Most people who got sense, they ain't gonna go back there," Wheeler said.

Builders have stake

The state plans to issue new guidelines this summer setting limits for concentrations of airborne chemicals.

Developers and those responsible for restoring polluted property are pushing for flexibility, saying they shouldn't be stuck with expensive cleanups at sites where the vapor risk is unproven. Environmentalists argue that vapor intrusion is yet another danger that could fall through the cracks in the zeal to redevelop contaminated land.

Although the DEP defends its record, it admits it hasn't always kept track of all of its cleanups. The department has fewer than 300 case managers for 15,500 contaminated sites, said Seebode, the assistant commissioner.

When the department lets landowners leave toxic chemicals in the ground, it usually relies on owners to certify the property remains safe. But of 92 such sites in Bergen and Passaic counties, the DEP could say only that 13 had filed biannual reports required by law since 1998. At only 37 sites could the department say it had done its own five-year inspections. The rest may or may not have been certified and inspected - the DEP's computer records aren't up-to-date enough to say, Seebode said.

Still, state officials insist they have paid close attention to indoor air quality for the past four years, since the fumes discovered in Wall Township highlighted the risks.

Developers have been forced to remove more contamination, to ensure vapors don't rise to hazardous levels, Seebode said. Ventilation systems have been ordered for schools built on contaminated properties even where dangers haven't been proved, he said.

What about cleanups before 2001? Declaring them safe from hazardous fumes is "a little tougher," said Barry Frasco, the DEP's assistant director of hazardous site science.

But even at older sites, the agency has required groundwater treatment systems, vapor barriers and other steps that should reduce the indoor air risk, Seebode said. "Those things create at least some confidence that this is not a big issue," he argued.

"We've got contamination ... that may affect indoor air," he said, "but that can't prevent us from being able to make smart economic and smart redevelopment decisions."

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel May 19, 2005

Dream house deferred; Carcinogen, cleanup problems plague couple's home on former tannery site

The American dream has turned into a nightmare for Green and Glenda Jackson after the couple learned that the site where they built their first home is contaminated with a chemical believed to be linked to cancer.

In its former life, the property - in the 1600 block of W. Galena St. - was a gas station and leather tannery. Traces of trichloroethylene, or TCE, a solvent sometimes used to degrease metal parts, has been found in the soil underneath the Jacksons' home.

"Someone should have known this," said Glenda Jackson, whose property formerly belonged to the City of Milwaukee. "We are very angry that the city allowed us to stay in this house with all of the known health risk. I don't want us to end up with cancer."

City officials weren't aware of the property's former use, said Andrea Rowe, spokeswoman for the Department of City Development.

"There was nothing in the history at the time that indicated its past use," Rowe said.

As the city moves swiftly to revitalize many of the central city's declining neighborhoods by offering $1 lots to urban developers and consumers in an effort to spur housing construction on scattered sites around town, the Jackson case raises concerns.

The Jacksons purchased their lot in 2000 from Ezekiel Community Development Corp., which built their home and others nearby. The Jacksons spent $99,000 for the house. Since then, more than $300,000 has been spent trying to clean up the site.

"The lots were bought from the city, and they were responsible for cleaning them up," said Johnny Moutry Jr., who headed Ezekiel at the time of the sale and is now the executive director of New Covenant Housing Corp., another non-profit urban development firm.

Not breaking down

Since the Jacksons bought their house, the city has gotten a better handle on the issues that can crop up on old city lots, Rowe said.

"We have on staff a professional brownfields team, who are environmental scientists with experience in investigation and remediation. It is our practice to further investigate the history of

sites, prior to purchase," she said. "We've sold 409 vacant lots for in-fill housing in the city of Milwaukee . . . without any exceptional situations like that of Ms. Jackson's."

Rowe said the city has attempted to remediate the problem at the Jacksons' home, with the city's Redevelopment Authority removing more than 3,000 tons of soil and injecting a compound to accelerate the natural degradation of contaminants in the groundwater.

But the chemicals, particularly TCE, aren't breaking down naturally, said Chuck Warzecha, a health risk assessor for the state Department of Health and Family Services.

The Redevelopment Authority, which placed seven monitoring wells around the property to collect groundwater, found that the site still has traces of TCE, as well as vinyl chloride. The biggest concern with TCE is vapor intrusion, Warzecha said, a process by which a chemical enters a building as a gas.

Based on the data collected at the Jacksons' home so far, "the worst case would be a pretty low increased cancer risk," said Warzecha, who is conducting further tests. "The risks would have been quite low, but if they are avoidable we prefer to remove them."

Barrier system

David Misky, an environmental scientist and the city's brownfields team coordinator, said a vapor/air monitoring system has been installed at the property, sump pumps have been sealed and a permit has been obtained from Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to discharge water into the sanitary system for treatment.

Misky said a barrier system has also been installed in the property's alley to prevent future re-contamination of the property from other sources. So far, the city has spent $325,802 on testing and remediation.

But the Jacksons, who have complained of chronic headaches, said they no longer want to live in the house.

"We either want them to buy the house or have us relocated," said Green Jackson, who along with his wife and teenage daughter have continued to live in the house.

Rowe said the city believes it can clean up the property. She said city officials are waiting on a letter from the Department of Natural Resources, "which should serve as an assurance that we remediated all of the environmental issues satisfactorily," she said. " . . . If we do not receive this letter from the DNR, we would have to revisit the issue."

Chicago Tribune May 22, 2005

Town stays adrift on sea of gasoline;

But after decades of leakage, an effort is under way to clean up a 3 million-gallon pool of leaded gas

HARTFORD, Ill.-The Web site for this river town advertises "location, location, location"--20 minutes from downtown St. Louis, on the National Scenic Byway where the Mississippi River meets the Missouri River.

Nowhere does it mention that the northern half of the village sits atop an estimated 3 million gallons of leaded gasoline that have seeped into the ground since the 1960s on its way from the refinery east of town to the river barges and truck terminals that carry it to Midwest gas stations.

Environmental officials think the gas leaked from some 20 underground pipelines and perhaps from the refinery itself, which has had several owners during the last 64 years.

Because of varying types of soil, the gas is a few feet underground in some spots while far deeper in others. Heavy rains or a rise in the Mississippi River raise the water table, forcing fumes into buildings through cracks in their foundations, or into the streets through sewers.

Over the years, at least 26 residential basement fires have been blamed on combustible soil gas. Fumes sometimes ignite into thin blue flames that resemble the pilot light on a stove. Noxious odors leave residents complaining of nausea, headaches and fatigue. North Side homeowners say their property values have tanked.

"Only an idiot would buy it," Noah Greer, 75, said of the house he has lived in since June 1976. "Of course, only an idiot would stay in it."

For decades, state environmental officials have tried unsuccessfully to solve the problem. Now, under the watch of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, a coalition of oil companies called the Hartford Working Group has begun a cleanup that has cost at least $15 million so far and could take up to 30 years.

The group's efforts--including sealing basements, adding ventilation systems and extracting gasoline vapors from the ground and sewers--don't inspire confidence in residents. They are weary of years of failed attempts.

"We're the guinea pigs while they use trial and error," said resident Mike Hanbaum. "The bottom line is that they can't get this gas out of the ground, and we continue to suffer."

More than 130 homeowners have joined a lawsuit filed last year against several oil and pipeline companies that did business in and around Hartford. At least 60 residents have filed individual lawsuits against the companies.

While some residents want to see the 235-plus affected home sites condemned, bulldozed and dredged, oil companies and government agencies say that is not in the plans.

Village leaders resist that idea because Hartford would lose a significant part of its tax base. And federal officials doubt it would hasten the cleanup because there is so much contaminated soil that it is unsafe to move it.

"I don't think there is a landfill in the world big enough to take it," said Chris Cahnovsky, a regional manager for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. "You're talking about a couple hundred thousand truckloads of dirt."

Federal officials predict the latest efforts by the oil companies will relieve much of the odor problem.

"The residents will soon see that things will be better," said Kevin Turner, an environmental scientist at the federal EPA.

When the problems surfaced in the 1960s, Hartford officials attributed them to swamp gas.

Then basements caught fire. State officials determined that thousands of gallons of gas were leaving the refinery and not making it through pipelines to the terminals. Fuel vapors, igniting flames beneath Hartford, meant the system was springing perilous leaks.

"I looked down the stairs and there were flames coming from every crack," said Virden Dobey, 71, recalling one fire in his basement in the 1970s. "It was like they turned the stove on."

Years of complaints brought little relief. Refinery owners dug three wells in the 1970s and began pumping liquid fuel from the ground. The process worked slowly and was limited to areas where the wells were dug. Many parts of north Hartford still were sitting above gasoline.

Then in the 1990s, the odors worsened. On state orders, the oil refinery installed a system to suck vapors from the ground and burn them off.

But after more than a decade, the system began breaking down. After several weeks of steady downpours during a wet spring in 2002, northern Hartford was again besieged by such strong gas smells and dangerous vapors that residents were forced to evacuate.

"The odor would knock you over," said Dave Phillips, who added that he thought the problems had been solved when he moved into his house in March 1998.

Finally, in 2003, the federal EPA stepped in, joining state and county officials in legal and enforcement actions against oil and pipeline companies that worked in and around Hartford. A consortium of current and former oil companies negotiated with the federal EPA to underwrite and coordinate an emergency cleanup.

Much of northern Hartford now is a construction zone. Crews have dug below streets and into sewer systems to pull vapors from the ground and transport them to treatment units for burning.

In more than 100 basements, workers have sealed cracks, installed ventilation systems and provided meters to monitor vapor levels. And this month, the Hartford working group began using portable wells to move about the village and again suck gas from the ground.

Still, federal EPA officials said it may take at least 20, and likely 30 years, before the gas is fully eliminated from Hartford.

Although some residents say the oil companies' efforts are working, others are skeptical. At least 40 homeowners have refused the working group's help. Some worry that cooperation might hinder their legal standing.

"People have been lying to us for years," said Bob May, who installed his own makeshift vent years ago after fires in his house and now is a party to a suit. "Why should we trust them now?"

Press & Sun-Bulletin June 19, 2005

Hillcrest cleanup shifts to industry

HILLCREST -- The cost of cleaning trichloroethylene (TCE) vapors affecting at least 100 properties in the center of this residential neighborhood is quickly nearing $500,000 -- a bill state officials expect to pass on to industry responsible for the pollution.

That includes Triple Cities Metal Finishing and CAE Electronics, companies that once operated neighboring factories on Nowlan Road, according to state Department of Environmental Conservation records.

The agency is not ruling out others.

"We know it will be those two, at a minimum, but we don't want to close the door," said Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer with the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Joseph Morgan, president of Triple Cities Metal Finishing, said in a statement Friday "our records indicate we never used TCE." The company is conducting its own tests to evaluate the DEC's finding of the chemical, a popular industrial solvent, under and around the former metal plating site.

Morgan was out of town and could not be reached for follow-up questions. Representatives for CAE could not be reached.

The metal plating site, now vacant, was occupied by Triple Cities since the early 1950s until the company moved to a newer site at Kirkwood Industrial Park in 1999.

The CAE site once was home to Singer-Link, manufacturer of flight simulators. It is now occupied by B. W. Elliott Manufacturing.

CAE already has spent more than $1 million excavating polluted soil from the site in the late 1990s and conducting ongoing tests of ground water. As that cleanup was entering its final

phase, tests by the DEC last winter showed a subterranean plume of TCE gas seeping into basements of nearby homes through a process called vapor intrusion. The state Department of Health will offer systems to divert the gas from about 70 properties, and additional testing for dozens of others.

Vents, similar to those used to prevent radon gases from entering, cost about $2,500. Testing for each property costs about the same. For now, the Hillcrest project -- and others like it in Vestal, Endicott, Binghamton and Norwich -- are being funded by state taxpayers through the Superfund.

One of the local firms dealing with the project, Enviro Testing of Binghamton, has installed about 3,500 systems in the region to keep subterranean gases -- mostly radon -- out of homes in the last 20 years, said owner Rick Tarnowski. But the market surged with the discovery in early 2003 that TCE from a former IBM site on North Street, Endicott, was seeping into nearby basements.

Daily News June 24, 2005

BX. SCHOOL FAILS TOXICS TEST

ELEVATED LEVELS of several toxic chemicals have been found in the air inside a controversial Bronx high school that city officials rushed to open last September on the site of a former electronics factory.

The city's Department of Education contends the Soundview Educational Campus, at Colgate and Story Aves., is safe for its 600 students. But neighborhood residents and Bronx political leaders believe the site is so contaminated the school should never have opened.

Indoor air tests at the school, performed for the School Construction Authority on March 25, suggest that chemicals from soil under the building are seeping inside, records obtained by the Daily News show.

Those tests detected elevated levels of two chlorinated solvents - known as TCE and PCE - in five of seven air samples taken from the school's cafeteria, kitchen and from first-floor classrooms.

In addition, soil vapor tests conducted under the school's foundation revealed far higher levels of the same two chemicals.

Recent federal studies have confirmed that vapors from contaminated soil sometimes penetrate through the concrete foundations of buildings.

In high doses, both TCE and PCE damage the brain, kidney and liver, while long-term low-level exposure can cause cancer.

The TCE and PCE levels inside the school do not qualify as an immediate health problem under current state health regulations. But the levels are high enough that the regulations require the city to "identify the source" of the chemicals and "reduce exposures."

Those same TCE levels would trigger immediate remediation in a state like Colorado, which has more stringent regulations.

The city's March 25 tests also detected low levels of more than a dozen other organic chemicals at the Soundview school. A copy of the test results was made available to The News by school officials after repeated requests.

Amazingly, Mayor Bloomberg's top school officials say the tests show there's nothing to worry about.

"I'm pleased with the results," said Vinicius Castagnola, vice president for quality assurance at the Department of Education. "We are seeing low concentrations in the school or in the subslab but no emerging conditions."

Castagnola acknowledged "there are some monitoring steps to be followed," and he conceded the state Health Department will now require more testing at the school.

As for all those other chemicals detected in the school's air, Education Department spokeswoman Kelly Devers dismissed them as "related to janitorial and cleaning supplies stored in the school." The low concentrations, she said, "didn't warrant any corrective measures."

None of this reassures local residents.

They are furious that City Hall and top school officials repeatedly have stonewalled their requests for all environmental testing data.

"The Department of Education won't even return our calls," said Janette Wipper, an attorney for the Concerned Residents of Soundview.

"They [city officials] are bending over backward not to find any connection to Loral's production on the site," said Mathy Stanislaus, an environmental consultant hired by residents to review the city's testing.

Loral Electronics was the military contractor that operated a factory on the site for decades until it shut the plant in 1996.

"Loral never did a cleanup," said Mary McKinney, who lives across the street from the site, "and it's continued to be a hazard in our community."

Not until last spring, when construction crews suddenly appeared and began round-the-clock work, did residents or Bronx elected officials learn about the city's plan for a school on the site.

That's also when they discovered that Dennis Walcott, the city's deputy mayor for education, had bypassed all the normal public review processes and quietly signed a zoning waiver so the city could rush to lease and renovate a two-story building on the site in time to open the new school in September.

This kind of blatant disregard for the city's democratic process at the community board and City Council level has become all too common in projects like the West Side stadium.

Even worse, as the Daily News' Bill Egbert has reported, residents belatedly discovered the city's tests of the soil and ground water at the site revealed huge amounts of lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and other toxic metals - levels far above acceptable state standards.

What was the city's response to its own shocking test results? It threw a foot of dirt on the contaminated soil around the proposed school, then assured residents that everything was safe.

Now, with **toxic vapors** apparently rising from that soil and seeping inside the building, Bloomberg's people keep insisting there's nothing wrong.

"I just can't believe they built this school at this site." said Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-Bronx, Queens).

Inland Valley Daily Bulletin June 28, 2005

Installation to begin this winter for areas near former site

NORCO Wyle Labs will install a system this winter to clean up chemical vapors found in the soil between its property boundary and Golden West Lane, said officials from the state Department of Toxic Substances Control on Monday.

Vapors are rising from contaminated groundwater in the area with the potential to affect the air in homes on the quiet residential street, according to a report from the department, which falls under the California Environmental Protection Agency.

The main chemical of concern is trichloroethylene, a cancer-causing industrial solvent that the state believes migrated from Wyle Labs.

TCE was first discovered in low levels last year in the ground outside three homes in the 2200 block of Golden West Lane. The properties sit at the bottom of a hill, separated by a fence from Wyle Labs, a high-tech testing and engineering company that used its 425-acre Norco site for more than 50 years to test products such as rocket fuel and electronics.

"We want to clean up any vapors that are migrating upwards and intercept them before they enter any homes," said Peter Garcia, department branch chief.

Garcia said the system is an interim remedy until a final plan to clean up groundwater and soil vapors is developed.

The extraction system draws chemicals in vapor form out of contaminated soil and cleans it before releasing it into the atmosphere.

When installed, the system -a series of underground wells - will resemble manhole covers, each about the size of a cereal bowl. Beneath the covers will be pipes extending back to the Wyle Labs property.

For Norma Delgado, the cleanup can't come fast enough. After traces of TCE and benzene were detected inside her family's home on Golden West last year, Wyle Labs was ordered by the state to install a ventilation system to break up the chemical's concentration.

Since late November, the ventilation system has run 24 hours a day inside their home, mixing indoor and outdoor air.

Delgado said that a month after the system was installed, air samples inside the home did not detect chemicals.

But during retesting this spring, TCE vapors were discovered in the Delgados' living room and master bedroom.

"If anything, we were hoping it was clearing out the bad air," Delgado said. "But now they found more stuff. So we don't know."

Tests this month also found light concentrations of TCE inside houses on both sides of the Delgados' home.

One of those homes belongs to Pat DuBiel, who, when she got the news, asked department officials to install a similar ventilation system inside her home.

But officials denied her request, saying the levels of TCE in her home were too low to warrant one.

"I don't find it nothing, though, to be quite frank," DuBiel said. "Any amount in my house is too much."

Wyle Labs, an El Segundo-based company, is under a state consent order to clean up contamination believed to have spread from its former site at 1841 Hillside Ave.

The area qualifies for listing as a Superfund site, making it one of the most polluted locations in the country.

The former test facility was sold in November 2002 to the St. Clair Company, a Newport Beach-based real estate development business.

Press & Sun-Bulletin June 30, 2005

State plans to expand search for toxic gas in Town of Union

A comprehensive search for subterranean gases from industrial solvents will continue moving out from the center of Endicott to include Endwell and, eventually, West Corners, state officials said Wednesday.

Officials expect data next month from about 25 more Endicott homes tested in March, said Mary Jane Peachey, a scientist with the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The latest findings will help clarify a picture that has been slowly taking shape since the 2003 discovery that trichloroethylene (TCE) pollution was forming gas and pushing into hundreds of village basements through a process called vapor intrusion.

Peachey was part of a group of more than a dozen scientists from federal, state and local health and environmental agencies publicly available to answer questions Wednesday afternoon and evening at Union-Endicott High School.

So far, IBM has installed systems to eliminate vapor intrusion on more than 430 buildings south of its former plant on North Street.

The DEC, working with the state Department of Health, is tapping Superfund money to look for TCE and other solvents east and west of the pollution attributed to the IBM site, and to install systems where necessary. That evaluation, starting with a broad review of industry records to show where more testing might be necessary, may take years and will eventually include most of the Town of Union.

Other updates from the session:

* The DOH and the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has completed a draft of its evaluation of illnesses south of the former IBM plant. The report, which analyzes birth outcomes and cancer rates, will be released in August or September, said Karolina Schabses, an epidemiologist with the DOH.

* IBM Corp. has installed a well to intercept pollution coming from the former North Street campus, now owned by Huron Real Estate Associates. The well is part of an upgrade, ordered by the DEC last year, to a network of pipes, pumps and wells installed to pull pollution from the ground after it was first discovered in the early 1980s.

"We want to answer everybody's questions. That's what we are here to do," Schabses said.

That's a tall order, considering the scientists themselves still have no answer to one of the most persistent questions: Has the pollution affected public health?

Frank Roma, a Hillcrest resident whose mother and sister live in Endicott, pointed to 15 or more scientists and technicians from federal, state and local agencies, standing in front of charts, graphs, maps and fact sheets on tables and easels stationed around the cafeteria.

"They are certainly putting a lot of staff time into it," he said. "Like everyone else, I'd like to see it go faster, but I think they are doing the right thing."

Philadelphia Inquirer July 10, 2005

Ill. town sits atop a problem; Below the houses, 3 million gallons of leaded gasoline have leaked into the soil.

The Web site for this river town advertises "location, location, location" - 20 minutes from downtown St. Louis, on the National Scenic Byway where the Mississippi River meets the Missouri River.

Nowhere does it mention that the northern half of the village sits atop an estimated three million gallons of leaded gasoline that have seeped into the ground since the 1960s on its way from a refinery east of town to the river barges and truck terminals that carry it to Midwest gas stations.

Environmental officials think the gasoline leaked from 20 underground pipelines and perhaps from the refinery itself, which has had several owners during the last 64 years.

Because of varying types of soil, the gas is a few feet underground in some spots while far deeper in others. Heavy rains or a rise in the Mississippi River raise the water table, forcing fumes into buildings through cracks in their foundations, or into the streets through sewers.

Over the years, at least 26 residential basement fires have been blamed on combustible soil gas. Fumes sometimes ignite into thin blue flames that resemble the pilot light on a stove. Noxious odors leave residents complaining of nausea, headaches and fatigue. North Side homeowners say their property values have tanked.

"Only an idiot would buy it," Noah Greer, 75, said of the house he has lived in since June 1976. "Of course, only an idiot would stay in it."

For decades, state environmental officials have tried to solve the problem. Now, under the watch of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, a coalition of oil companies called the Hartford Working Group has begun a cleanup that has cost at least $15 million so far and could take up to 30 years.

The group's efforts - including sealing basements, adding ventilation systems and extracting gasoline vapors from the ground and sewers - don't inspire confidence in residents. They are weary of years of failed attempts.

"We're the guinea pigs while they use trial and error," resident Mike Hanbaum said. "The bottom line is that they can't get this gas out of the ground, and we continue to suffer."

More than 130 homeowners have joined a lawsuit filed last year against several oil and pipeline companies that did business in and around Hartford. At least 60 residents have filed individual lawsuits against the companies.

While some residents want to see the 235-plus affected home sites condemned, bulldozed and dredged, oil companies and government agencies say that is not in the plans.

Village leaders resist that idea because Hartford would lose a significant part of its tax base. And federal officials doubt it would hasten the cleanup because there is so much contaminated soil that it is unsafe to move it.

"I don't think there is a landfill in the world big enough to take it," said Chris Cahnovsky, a regional manager for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. "You're talking about a couple hundred thousand truckloads of dirt."

Federal officials predict the latest efforts by the oil companies will relieve much of the odor problem.

"The residents will soon see that things will be better," said Kevin Turner, an environmental scientist at the federal EPA.

When the problems surfaced in the 1960s, Hartford officials attributed them to swamp gas.

Then basements caught fire. State officials determined that thousands of gallons of gasoline were leaving the refinery and not making it through pipelines to the terminals. Fuel vapors, igniting flames beneath Hartford, meant the system was springing perilous leaks.

"I looked down the stairs and there were flames coming from every crack," said Virden Dobey, 71, recalling one fire in his basement in the 1970s. "It was like they turned the stove on."

Years of complaints brought little relief. Refinery owners dug three wells in the 1970s and began pumping liquid fuel from the ground. The process worked slowly and was limited to areas where the wells were dug. Many parts of north Hartford still were sitting above gasoline.

Then in the 1990s, the odors worsened. On state orders, the oil refinery installed a system to suck vapors from the ground and burn them off.

But after more than a decade, the system began breaking down. After several weeks of steady downpours during a wet spring in 2002, northern Hartford was again besieged by such strong gas smells and dangerous vapors that residents were forced to evacuate.

Much of northern Hartford now is a construction zone. Crews have dug below streets and into sewer systems to pull vapors from the ground and transport them to treatment units for burning.

In more than 100 basements, workers have sealed cracks, installed ventilation systems and provided meters to monitor vapor levels.

Although some residents say the oil companies' efforts are working, others are skeptical.

"People have been lying to us for years," said Bob May, who installed his own makeshift vent years ago after fires in his house and now is a party to a lawsuit. "Why should we trust them now?"

Press & Sun-Bulletin August 11, 2005

Vent installation begins on 27 properties in Norwich

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NORWICH Work is under way to install systems that would divert subterranean chemical gases from 27 properties near a polluted site in the city, state officials said Wednesday.

The state said removing asbestos and fixing dirt floors in basements could prolong the project in some homes.

Tests earlier this year showed trichloroethylene (TCE) vapors were seeping into basements from a process called vapor intrusion. The affected area is generally within two acres of the intersection of Rexford Street and a railway operated by New York Susquehanna and Western Railway Corp. The chemicals are coming from the edge of the railway, about 200 feet north of the intersection, according to DEC records.

All of the affected property owners have agreed to let the state install the systems, which range from less than $2,500 to more than $15,000 each, depending on the amount of work necessary for the system to function properly in some older homes. That price, paid for by the state, includes some testing after the installation to ensure the systems are effective.

Occasionally, some residents affected by vapor intrusion in other communities have rejected the offer because they want to be left alone, or they fear the system will stigmatize their property, said Geoffrey Laccetti, a public health specialist with the state Department of Health.

Residents who attended a public information session Wednesday at the city court house expressed concern about TCE exposure and relief the state was addressing the problem.

"We don't have a choice. We have to have it put in," said Rose Yacano, who used to live in a house on Silver Street that she now rents to others. She is worried about delayed health effects from TCE exposure for her and her tenants. "We are glad they are doing it. But we don't know what's going to happen."

The project will give Lloyd and Susan Tefft, neighborhood residents for more than 30 years, peace of mind.

"The way I see it, it's not a big threat," Lloyd Tefft said.

"But it could be," Susan Tefft added.

"All of September will be dedicated to putting systems in," said Thomas Suozzo, an engineer with the state Department of Environmental Conservation. Some will go faster.

For homes that have a cement foundation and no asbestos problems, the project is relatively simple.

The systems similar to radon systems keep subterranean fumes from entering buildings by sucking them from under the foundations and venting them into the outside air.

But the system, which requires a vacuum to draw vapors from under the house, does not work efficiently for homes with dirt floors in the basement. Asbestos, which might be a hazard for workers, must also be removed.

"Quite a few of them don't have slabs. They are going to be a little more involved," Suozzo said.

TCE, a cleaning solvent once used by many industries, can raise the risk of illnesses ranging from rashes to cancer in people exposed to enough of it. Levels in some homes, including the Teffts, exceeded the guideline of 5 micrograms per cubic meter of air.

There is little consensus regarding how much TCE exposure poses unacceptable hazards, but scientists do agree it is different for different people.

The state guideline is a conservative number, Laccetti said. "Levels where we would expect to see acute health affects would have to be higher than that," he said.

Scientists are unsure of the effects of long term exposure to low concentrations.

The Ithaca Journal August 24, 2005

S. Hill spill affecting housing market

ITHACA - One family already backed out of buying Mary Beth O'Connor's arts and crafts bungalow on South Hill Terrace. With a new baby and worries about contamination from the Emerson Power Transmission plant, the family felt they couldn't make the commitment.

A couple of blocks down South Hill Terrace, George and Mary Atrio started Sunday to move their son, an Ithaca College junior, into the second home they recently bought. After investigating the contamination and talking with various officials, the couple felt comfortable enough to make the investment.

These two situations, just yards away from each other, highlight the uncertain housing market that took over this South Hill neighborhood soon after contamination was found spreading down the hill from the former Morse Chain plant.

While the initial problem came from a leak identified in 1987, it was only last year that a neighborhood outcry led to expanded testing. Indoor air tests were looking primarily for evidence of trichloroethene, or TCE. A possible carcinogen, TCE can affect cognitive ability and the nervous system after long-term exposure. The chemical was a component used to degrease chain when the plant was owned by Morse Chain. Emerson bought the property, and inherited the problem, in 1983.

The neighborhood is waiting for the next round of tests, which are slated for October, the start of the heating season.

O'Connor's house is one of those expected to be tested again. In her most recent results, taken earlier this year, almost all chemical levels inside the house were below state standards. Beneath the concrete slab in her basement, readings were much higher. The disparity between the indoor and sub-slab readings suggested that her cement floor serves as an effective barrier to vapor intrusion.

Nonetheless, since June, O'Connor has had few nibbles on a house full of appealing details. There's a patchwork-painted porch, original light fixtures and leaded windows, which all add character to the home. The packet of information about the testing that she is obligated to disclose is less charming.

"When I put the house on the market in the end of June, it was way past the end of the season, so there's that. But I do think that the Emerson situation is an impact. It's a great house. It would be a shame ..." she said, leaving her sentence unfinished.

Another South Hill resident, Ken Deschere, bought a South Hill Terrace home with his wife in 1981. They have no plans to move anytime soon.

"Before the news of the tests and the test results, all the houses around here sold for above the asking price. One house sold in less than a week. Recently a house down the road finally sold after quite a while, and I think he barely got his money back," Deschere said. "The feeling is this neighborhood is not considered as desirable as it once was. It does seem the perceived values have changed drastically."

Assessment department officials aren't convinced that's true. A house on West Spencer Street, which is within the investigation area, sold this month for $117,000, according to Jay Franklin, assistant director of the assessment department. That was $32,000 above the asking price.

"This is one of the nicest parts of town. The best thing is the vast majority of testing has shown there's not much to be concerned about," said Bill Kaupe, a long-time resident of South Cayuga Street. "This whole neighborhood has gotten tarred by this problem, and it's just not born out by the facts."

For realtors and assessors, it's a much grayer reality. They evaluate the impacts of pollution on home sales on a case-by-case basis.

"It depends. To some buyers, living next to a cemetery is enough to rule out a house. Other people may have no problem with that. It's a case-by-case situation," said Diane Cooper, sales manager for Audrey Edelman and Associates RealtyUSA.

In the case of the Atrios, extensive research gave them enough information to feel as though they understood the risk they were taking, which, in their case, they see as minimal.

Based in Miami, the couple viewed the home, which had been on the market for a while and dropped in price, as a good investment. After two rounds of test, no chemicals were found at levels they felt were problematic. Talks with the Departments of Health and Environmental Conservation, reinforced this perception.

"We love Ithaca. We love South Hill. We understand that the spill is, was and will be," George Atrio said. "We live in a polluted world."

The Atrios both said they will be keeping a close eye on the situation; their neighbors on both sides were designated for continued monitoring.

"If my son starts to feel sick," Mary Atrio said, "I have no problem going right out and sticking a for sale sign on the lawn."

Buffalo News September 12, 2005

19 homes get devices to remove gases

Nineteen homes in Gowanda have been fitted with special equipment to remove dangerous gases seeping into their basements from industrial ground water contamination, Cattaraugus County Environmental Health Director Eric Wohlers reported last week to members of the county's Board of Health.

He said volatile organic chemicals, mostly trichloroethene (TCE), migrated from a site off Industrial Street into the ground water beneath homes in the Torrance Place and Chestnut Street neighborhood.

Testing by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, following a decision in 2001 for an environmental cleanup, showed a 450-foot-wide plume of contamination moving northward about six to eight feet below ground level.

Gases from the TCE and other volatile organic compounds, including benzene, xylenes, toluene and other compounds, permeate the soils, and vapors seep into the basements, crawl spaces and cement slabs of homes built at grade level.

The plume's origin is 1,100 feet away at the former AVM-Gowanda site, now owned by Gowanda Electronics. That firm has cooperated with the industrial site investigations, soil removal and treatment of ground water in a voluntary cleanup agreement with the DEC.

The process for keeping soil vapors from migrating into basements and through ground-level slabs is called sub-slab depressurization. It employs the same devices used to prevent radon from entering basements.

Contractors, the DEC and the state Department of Health sampled homes in a variety of ways last year to determine the location of intrusive soil vapors and to select homes to receive the devices. Tests were performed in two visits, and homeowners were quizzed on the extent of the problem via a questionnaire.

Homes that received the subslab depressurization systems had TCE levels at five micrograms per cubic meter or more that were attributed to a soil vapor intrusion. The system is paid for by the state or the party that is determined to be responsible for the AVM ground water contamination.

For testing of air in homes built on basements and grade-level slabs, a three-eighths-inch hole was drilled through the concrete, and gas samples were taken from beneath the slab and from the inside of the basement or ground floor. Samples also were taken of the air in crawl spaces and first-floor rooms in homes with crawl spaces.

The subslab depressurization systems use suction to extract TCE and other vapors to the atmosphere through a system of pipes and a fan.

TCE exposure at elevated levels in air and water has been associated with increased risks for certain types of cancer in the kidney, liver and esophagus, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Eye and respiratory irritation have also been associated with exposure in some lab tests, and there have been documented association in damage to the central nervous system and fetal development.

Contra Costa Times November 11, 2005

Underground contamination focus of suit

Residents of the Colony Park neighborhood in Concord are suing nearby landowners they say are responsible for the cleanup of a toxic groundwater plume running under their homes.

More than 140 neighbors are plaintiffs in the suit against Union Pacific Railroad and property owners Daniel and Mary Lou Helix. Residents say toxic chemicals emanating from the plume continue to contaminate groundwater and air underneath their homes, according to the suit. They also claim the value of their properties has been compromised.

"The existence of the contamination is, we think, a material fact that any homeowner would have to disclose when selling their house and we think that would impact their ability to sell their homes," said Richard Bowles, the attorney for the neighbors.

The contaminated water originates from the former Southern Pacific Railroad site at Hookston Station, at the corner of Hookston and Bancroft roads. Union Pacific took over Southern Pacific

and the Helixes later purchased a portion of the property, making both parties responsible for the cleanup.

While toxic chemicals were discovered in the 1980s on the property, it wasn't until 2000 that the state Regional Water Quality Control Board became involved and, in 2003, required the two owners to clean it up, according to the control board officials. In 2004, air samples were taken from several homes which revealed higher-than-normal levels of toxic chemicals in the air, they said. Some homes have been outfitted with a filtering system to alleviate that.

Water quality board officials say they continue to work actively with the property owners toward getting the job done.

"We consider this a pretty significant site because of the vapor intrusion aspect, so we're taking this case quite seriously and staffing it quite heavily," said Stephen Hill, toxic cleanup division chief for the regional board. "We think the problem is relatively simple to fix in terms of future exposure. We see it as a solvable problem."

Efforts are under way, Hill added, but it could take several years to detoxify the water. A risk assessment study has already been conducted and a clean-up plan is now in the works.

The Colony Park neighborhood is a cluster of older homes with longtime residents. Its neighborhood association boasts more than 100 members and it's near Pleasant Hill's Fair Oaks Elementary School.

In addition to the suit filed in August, neighbors have gone before the Concord City Council to get the state to have the Department of Toxic Substances take over clean-up efforts from the regional quality board.

"We're not happy with the regional board overseeing the project," said neighbor Ron Block, adding that neighbors feel the toxic substances department is better suited to handle it. "These chemicals are carcinogens, which means you have the risk of getting cancer."

Block, a toxicologist himself, spoke on behalf of his neighbors but would not directly discuss the lawsuit. Representatives from Union Pacific said they planned to fight the suit aggressively.

Stephen McKae, attorney for the Helixes, said his clients are doing everything they can to address the problem.

"The Regional Water Quality Control Board has been supervising the site for at least five years now," McKae said. "I think the agencies (involved) have been satisfied with the process and would like to see it concluded, and the Helixes would like to see it concluded too...they've been working on this for 15 years."