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Expert: Toxic waste could be a huge problem in Horseheads district

Horseheads school officials say potential problem being taken seriously

By Jeff Murray
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HORSEHEADS - The head of an Ithaca environmental firm is keeping pressure on the Horseheads Central School District to address a long-forgotten toxic waste site on school property.

But school district officials say they are taking every necessary step to find out if there is any health threat from the site, and some nearby residents are wondering what all the fuss is about.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting Inc., uncovered information about a 3-acre former dump site while doing research on the Horseheads Schlumberger project.

Hang sent a letter to the school district to alert them to the presence of the site, located near the high school athletic fields.

School officials promptly hired a Syracuse environmental consultant to assess the site - officially known as Kentucky Avenue Satellite No. 18 - and that consultant gave a preliminary report at the Oct. 8 school board meeting.

But the consultant didn't seem to recognize the potential risks of the site, Hang said in a follow-up letter.

"I attended the Horseheads Central School District Board of Education meeting last week and was dismayed by the presentation of the board's environmental consultant," Hang wrote. "He implied that the toxic chemicals reported at the site were 'low-level' and associated with petroleum runoff from the parking lot. He failed to address the reported presence of DDT, Chlordane, mercury, chlorinated solvents, polychlorinated biphenyls and a broad range of human cancer-causing polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons."

The consultant also failed to address the potential environmental and public health threats to the adjoining athletic fields posed by contaminated dust emissions, groundwater contamination, surface runoff and soil gas vapor intrusion, Hang stated.

District responds

But Horseheads School Superintendent Ralph Marino said the district plans a thorough investigation, and has already committed up to \$38,500 to make sure there are no health or safety concerns associated with the dump site.

"We are receiving good information and advice from the DEC, our architect and environmental engineer. We are proceeding thoroughly and methodically to ensure nothing is missed," Marino said. "Right now, we are awaiting the results of soil samples from the perimeter of the site that is identified in the EPA and DEC reports. We should have the results next week and are planning another update to

the board on Oct. 22."

A profile sheet on file with the DEC indicates the waste site was a small landfill or dump in the early 1960s. The site eventually was covered with clean fill before being converted to athletic fields.

The Environmental Protection Agency investigated the site in 1986, and their findings indicated there was no danger from that location, said Bart Putzig, DEC regional remediation engineer.

"Other data we could get on the site suggest they were dismissed in 1994 by EPA. Our position is they remain very low-priority sites, and that earlier testing ruled them out as a source of contamination," Putzig said. "Their findings, from what I've read, do not elevate the site at all from the DEC perspective."

Neighbors not worried

Some residents who live close to the Horseheads school property are also skeptical that there is any danger from a long-abandoned dump.

"I've lived here all my life. I remember it used to be a big field and a swamp. Other than that, I never saw anything," said Ed Frycek of Carroll Street. "I don't have any concerns. I don't know why they are making a big deal about it now. It's been there for 45 years."

Retired Chemung County Judge William Danaher, who lives on Steuben Street, right next to the Horseheads athletic fields, said his family used to own most of the school property when it was part of their farm.

The family sold the property to the school district in 1962, said Danaher, who does remember a small dump site just beyond his family's farm.

But the site was not a place where industrial waste was dumped, he said.

"When I was young, there was a small dump through that area. I think it was just a place where people left stuff," Danaher said. "No family death has ever been traced to that. I'm not worried."

Additional Facts

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* The Horseheads school board will meet at 7 p.m. Thursday in the multimedia center in the south wing of Horseheads High School. Superintendent Ralph Marino will present an update on the former dump site on high school property.
