

Newsday.com

News | Entertainment | Sports | Jobs | Cars | Real Estate | Apartments | ShopLocal | Place An Ad **am New York**

Wells near gas plant closed Drinking water found contaminated with Freon 12; problem not linked to toxic leaks at MGP site

BY MARK HARRINGTON

mark.harrington@newsday.com

July 6, 2007

State health officials and consultants at a public meeting last week were quick to note that two public drinking water wells a stone's throw from a highly toxic utility gas-plant site in Hempstead are not contaminated with waste from the plant's toxins. Even under the worst of circumstances, contamination won't reach the 500-foot-plus deep wells for 16 to 175 years, they said.

Officials neglected to mention another fact that some say is greater cause for alarm: Both wells have been shut down since last year because of detection of Freon 12. In addition, according to a Health Department spokeswoman, the presence of iron in one of the wells is so pervasive that it "can't be treated/remediated, so we do not expect it to reopen."

Although officials stress that neither substance is typically associated with manufactured gas-plant toxins, no one can say where the Freon came from.

Local officials and residents said they were surprised to hear the drinking water wells just 200 feet from the toxic site were out of service given the assurances the state made last week about their safety from gas-plant toxins.

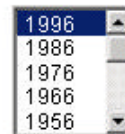
State officials "unequivocally maintained from day one that there were no toxins found in the Garden City wells," said Leone Baum, vice president of the Hempstead Chamber of Commerce and a Hempstead resident who lives a block from the site. Officials "absolutely did not" mention the closures at last week's meeting with the public, Baum added.

A state official familiar with the site explained the closure wasn't mentioned because "it wasn't related to contamination at our site."

A legislator expressed similar frustration that a voluminous report commissioned by site owner KeySpan Corp., and approved by the departments of health and environmental conservation and conducted by an outside consultant, neglected to mention the wells were contaminated and closed.

The presence of Freon 12 "in groundwater testing absolutely must be reported and should be mentioned in any remedial investigation report or test results,"

Find Your Graduating Class



 classmates.com

said Nassau Legis. David Denenberg (D-Merrick). "It could be explained as not likely to have emanated from the [manufactured-gas plant], but it must be reported."

One expert said the mere proximity of drinking water supply wells to a heavily contaminated site such as the one in Hempstead should send up a field of red flags - and prompt immediate containment measures.

"There's no rational reason for allowing a heavily polluted site to remain without remediation right next door to a public drinking water well field," said Walter Hang, president of environmental database company Toxics Targeting in upstate Ithaca. His company received the information about the contaminated wells through Freedom of Information Law requests last month.

"The pollution source has to be cleaned up so it doesn't jeopardize the water supply now and in the future," said Hang, who noted that the well's proximity to the heavy coal tar presents the risk such toxins could slip down the water well casing rather than through a much slower path in the ground.

State and local health officials, however, said there's little risk of such an event, and the site's consultant said complex computer models show there's little or no risk of contamination affecting those wells for at least 16 years.

"This [Freon] has nothing to do with the MGP site," said Dennis Kelleher, a senior vice president with H2M Group in Melville, which tested the water for the KeySpan study and has worked for the villages of Hempstead and Garden City. "Freon was not used at that site."

A call to the Village of Garden City was forwarded to the Nassau Health Department. Cynthia Brown, a spokeswoman for the department, said Freon was first detected at one site this past October (Kelleher said low levels of Freon had subsequently been detected at the other adjacent well).

"Garden City took the well out of service and is working to develop a temporary treatment measure," Brown said. "There's no connection" to the MGP site. "You're talking apples and oranges."

Copyright 2007 Newsday Inc.