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Letter asks state for more TCE tests at elementary

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ITHACA — The state should conduct additional testing for TCE and other toxic chemicals at South Hill Elementary School, according to a letter signed by a coalition of parents, citizens and elected officials.

The letter is being sent today to the New York State Department of Health. It demands additional indoor air testing in classrooms as soon as the heating season begins because trapped air holds in more toxins.

The letter is signed by 77 people, including New York State Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-125th; Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson; Tompkins County Legislators Tim Joseph (D-12th), Pam Mackesey (D-1st), Nathan Shinagawa (D-4th) and Kathy Luz Herrera (D-5th); Ithaca Town Board Supervisor candidate Herb Engman; and Common Council alderwoman Maria Coles (D-1st).

“How do you expect polluters to follow the letter of the law if the state isn't even following the letter of the law?” said Walter Hang of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, the activist who drafted the letter.

Hang argues that the DOH is not following its own policy, as set out in a 2006 DOH document called “Guidance for Evaluating Soil Vapor Intrusion in the State of New York.”

“Buildings with known or suspected areas of subsurface chemical contamination that are used or occupied by sensitive population groups (e.g., daycare facilities, schools, nursing homes, etc.) should be given special consideration for sampling,” the guideline states.

The first-ever testing at the school for trichloroethylene (TCE), tetrachloroethylene (PERC) and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) was completed this summer.

Outdoor soil vapor sampling on the school grounds and playground was carried out by Emerson Power Transmission, which sits across Aurora Street from South Hill Elementary. TCE and PERC were used by Emerson's previous owner, Morse Chain, to degrease parts until the late 1970s. The chemicals are considered likely carcinogens.

Those tests found TCE and PERC in every sample but at levels that the DEC and Department of Health considered low enough to require no further action.

Because the site is a school, however, the Ithaca City School District and concerned parents requested additional testing inside the school.

DEC and the Department of Health carried out tests of sub-slab soil vapor and basement crawlspace air vapor Aug 21-22.

On Sept. 5, the Department of Health sent a letter to ICSD Superintendent Judith Pastel saying that “as is often the case, low levels of VOCs were detected in all samples collected.”

The indoor tests found low but detectable levels of TCE, PERC, chloroform and other VOCs underneath the building basement's sub slab.

There was no detection of TCE or PERC in the indoor air samples in the basement crawlspace. Other VOCs were detectable at low levels in the basement crawlspace.

Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer at DEC involved in South Hill testing, said VOC levels for all substances were well below state guidelines for mitigation or further testing.

“Because we have technology that allows us to detect at these extremely low levels, we're able to measure those — that's great, but we need to keep in mind that these are extremely small numbers,” she said.

Claire Pospisil, a Department of Health spokeswoman, said state analyses of the school showed that the VOCs present in the school were a result of “activities that were going on in the school itself, rather than coming from outside the school.”

“If you refinish a gym floor, you will have VOCs in that area,” she gave as an example.

Hang is unconvinced by this reasoning, largely because of the school's proximity to known polluted sites.

“The school is located directly across the street from the heavily-polluted Emerson Power Transmission (EPT) factory,” the letter states. “This State Superfund site has been classified a ‘significant threat to public health or the environment — action required,’ but it has neither been fully investigated nor cleaned up after more than 20 years of inadequate state effort.”

When the Department of Health sent its letter Sept. 5, ICSD agreed that no additional testing was necessary.

Paul Mintz, assistant superintendent for business services for ICSD, said on Sept. 5, “If those tests had come back indicating a problem, then you would certainly want to test the upper floors to see if it's escaping. But because these tests came back negative, there was no indication that further testing was needed.”

Since then, ICSD's position has changed. At a school board meeting Sept. 11, parents of South Hill children asked the district to demand additional testing of classroom air. Pastel said the district would request that the state agencies conduct additional testing.

Pastel said Wednesday that ICSD has already asked the state agencies for more testing inside the school once the heating season begins.

“We've already verbally told them that we want to do additional testing,” she said. “We are in fact requesting that there will be more testing.”

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