ithacajournal.com

September 23, 2008

Toxics Targeting owner makes hazardous-site maps available online

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ITHACA — Walter Hang has made his enormous database of toxic-site maps available for free online.

The Ithaca business owner and outspoken environmental activist makes his living compiling environmental database records from local, state and federal agencies and creating maps that show potential property buyers where pollution has been found.

“Even though the vast majority of my clients are engineers and environmental consultants, I started this company to help people who are buying homes,” Hang said.

New York state law requires property owners to clean up environmental hazards on their property, regardless of whether they or a previous owner caused the problem. Environmental pollution also has the risk of harm to human health, and homeowners should be aware if they live near a toxic site, Hang said.

“Everybody knows when buying a used car to take it to a mechanic to make sure it isn't a lemon,” Hang said. But nobody tells people they need to do that with property purchases, too, he said.

“Some real estate brokers who have never referred a single homebuyer have purchased environmental database reports for their own real estate purchases,” he said.

The maps are linked to Hang's Toxics Targeting Web site, http://maps.toxicstargeting.com. They include more than 270,000 “known or potential environmental hazards in New York State” and are linked to three different types of maps — a standard road map, an aerial map powered by Google, and a Bird's Eye View map powered by Microsoft. Where available, the maps are also connected to Google's Street View, which shows locations as though a person were literally standing in the middle of a street looking at buildings.

The new mapping tool, which Hang says is the first of its kind, was recently featured in the New York Times Real Estate section.

The maps show 26 categories of environmental information, from state and U.S. Superfund sites to gasoline spills, oil storage facilities, Brownfield sites and chemical bulk storage.

For example, a search on Ithaca's City Hall, 108 E. Green St., shows that within one block there are two unidentified spills of petroleum or some other hazardous substance, a gasoline spill, two petroleum bulk storage facilities of at least 1,100 gallons capacity and a hazardous waste generator.

Toxics Targeting has been based in Ithaca since 1990, though almost none of its clients are local, Hang said.

The maps make it possible for individuals to quickly and easily determine where potential hazards exist, and once people know about pollution, then they can do something about it, he said.

The site also includes a “Toxic Site Slideshow” with a PowerPoint-like presentation of photos and information to help people identify things that might indicate pollution problems — such as petroleum bulk storage tanks, groundwater monitoring wells, and sub-slab depressurization systems for indoor air pollution.