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Local News - Friday, November 19, 2004

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Tests show no toxic pollution from old factory site

JENNIE DALEY
Journal Staff

ITHACA -- An air of cautious optimism has settled on South Hill after some residents received results of home air pollution tests.

The homes are all in an area potentially affected by pollution from the former Morse Chain factory on Danby Road and were tested by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, starting in September.

Of the 44 homes where air was analyzed, about a dozen received letters detailing the DEC findings, according to Mary Jane Peachey, Region 7 engineer for the DEC.

Tim Weber, a South Cayuga Street resident whose house was in the first round of evaluations, is compiling results from neighbors to create an informal database.

"We haven't seen anything that's over any limits or exposure guidelines that we know of," Weber said, "but it's still early."

The element of greatest concern is trichloroethylene, or TCE. The chemical was used up until 1983 at the former Morse Chain factory, now the site of Emerson Power Transmission. TCE is a toxic solvent used to degrease power transmission chains made at the plant.

During the 1960s, as much as 300 gallons of oil from operations would be disposed of daily from Morse Chain, according to Tompkins County Health Department records. That oil would reportedly leak into the ground over a long period, according to Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, a local environmental consulting group.

"It's possible that people are living in homes that have been contaminated for this whole time," Hang said.

The DEC tested homes for 64 elements. TCE is one of eight site-related contaminants on that list. Another is tetrachloroethylene, also a toxic

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chemical. In the early results, tetrachloroethylene was more prominent than TCE, but still not above available Department of Health exposure limits, according to Weber.

Samples, taken by the DEC, cost about \$800 per test, and each house requires an average of two or three tests. Emerson is footing the bill for this round of tests.

"These results are very encouraging," said Derek E. Chase, Emerson director of environmental affairs. "As part of the approved testing process, we'll be working with homeowners and the state to conduct an additional round of sampling at these homes during February and March."

Peachey said the DEC won't decide what actions are needed, if any, until all of the first round of test results are in and can be interpreted as a whole.

"They're health driven numbers and are just guidelines. You can't just look at one particular number. You need to look at all the data points you have and then make a decision," she said.

Peachey said she expects that analysis to be available by January. Officials from the DEC, New York State Department of Health and Emerson then will hold a meeting sharing their review of the findings.

In the meantime, Weber said he'll continue to be hopeful.

"The numbers obviously don't mean that's everything's okay but it does seem to indicate that everything's not terrible," he said.

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