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Clinton West Plaza named Superfund site for VOC cleanup

By Krisy Gashler

Journal Staff

ITHACA — The Clinton West Plaza — home of Ohm Electronics, Tanfastic, the Ithaca Pennysaver and the Daycare and Child Development Council of Tompkins County, among others — has recently been added as the 12th state Superfund site in Tompkins County.

In 2005 and 2006 testing, four volatile organic compounds, including trichloroethylene, or TCE, and tetrachloroethylene, or PERC, were found on the plaza far above state-mandated groundwater standards. All four were found in at least one sample at levels that exceeded the equipment's capacity to measure.

According to the DEC's environmental assessment, "The concentration of contaminants in some of the samples exceeded the calibration range of the instrument for that particular analysis. Samples collected from each monitoring well had exceedances for at least two of the compounds listed."

The results are posted at an environmental site remediation database, at [www.dec.ny.gov/cfm/xtapps/derfoil/index.cfm?pageid=3](http://www.dec.ny.gov/cfm/xtapps/derfoil/index.cfm?pageid=3).

"The lateral and vertical extent of groundwater contamination is unknown," according to the Web site.

In the past two weeks the plaza's owners, Clinton West Ltd., conducted testing to determine whether any of the contamination has migrated to surrounding properties, including some residences.

Soil conditions with high amounts of sand and gravel could make it easier for contamination to spread, according to DEC documents.

Neil Gingold, special counsel for Clinton West Ltd., said the contamination was discovered when a potential purchaser did an environmental audit of the property in 2005 and 2006. Prior to that, owners had no suspicion of the contamination — "none whatsoever," he said.

That sale has fallen through, he said.

Clinton West Ltd. reported the test results to the state Department of Environmental Conservation and then worked with the agency for "the better part of a year" to develop a work plan to assess the extent of the contamination and any impact it may have on tenants or nearby residents.

The initial testing found contamination in the parking lot west of Clinton West Laundry. The source is suspected to be waste from dry cleaning operations conducted at the site from at least 1970 until 2000, according to Gingold and DEC records. The store still takes in dry cleaning, but it is now processed off site, Gingold said.

PERC, a likely carcinogen, is widely used in dry cleaning, and the other three compounds are breakdown components of PERC, according to DEC records.

The 2005 and 2006 testing was exclusively outside, measuring groundwater and soil vapor, Gingold said. The testing conducted in the last two weeks includes six locations inside the plaza and five neighboring properties that are being tested for soil vapor intrusion, he said. This involves taking soil samples from underneath basement sub-slabs and testing ambient air inside homes and the plaza.

Gingold said he couldn't estimate when those test results will be available.

In the 2005 and 2006 groundwater samples, environmental consultants LCS Inc. found:

\* Tetrachloroethylene, or PERC, between 28 and the equipment's maximum limit of 1,900 parts per billion. The state-mandated limit is 5 ppb.

\* Trichloroethene, or TCE, between 8 and the equipment limit of 2,000 parts per billion. The state limit is also 5 ppb.

\* cis-1,2-dichloroethene between 27 and the equipment limit of 2,600 parts per billion. The allowable limit is 5 ppb.

\* Vinyl chloride between 97 and the equipment limit of 930 ppb. The allowable limit is 2 ppb.

According to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, PERC “may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen.” At high levels, it causes liver tumors in mice and kidney tumors in male rats, according to the ATSDR Web site.

Very little is known about potential human health impacts from long-term, low-level exposure to any of the compounds.

The State Department of Health cannot yet assess any potential impacts on human health until air tests inside structures come back.

Department spokesman Jeffrey Hammond emphasized that because the site is almost entirely paved and no one drinks the groundwater, exposure is limited to soil vapor intrusion inside buildings.

Like six other Tompkins County sites, Clinton West Plaza has been classified as class 2, the highest designation ever assigned by New York state.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, which maps environmental remediation sites, said compared to other superfund sites in Tompkins County, what makes this site more problematic is the nearby and densely populated residential neighborhoods and the fact that the site is paved.

“I think the key issue with the West Clinton site is that it has a lot more residential home exposure, essentially on three sides,” he said. “Unfortunately in many cases, the presence of paved areas allows the contamination to migrate farther and potentially threaten more homes.”

Gingold emphasized that while contamination is suspected to have come from the dry cleaning operations, that hasn't been proven.

“At this point it's suspected that it may have come from this dry cleaners. It's probably not as probable but equally plausible that it could have come from something spilled in the parking lot from a truck, something done clandestinely, we just don't know,” Gingold said.

This is Tompkins County's 12th state Superfund site. Tompkins County also has two Brownfield voluntary cleanup sites: Ithaca Gun and the South Hill Business Campus.

Among the county's immediate neighbors, Schuyler County has the fewest environmental site remediations with three, according to DEC records available online.

Cortland County has seven, Tioga has nine. Broome County hosts the most, 44 sites.

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