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State insists S. Hill school's air is safe for kids

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ITHACA — Representatives from the state Departments of Environmental Conservation, Health and Education reaffirmed their belief that South Hill Elementary School is safe and no further testing is needed at a public meeting at the school Monday night.

Some parents, elected officials and environmental activists at the meeting continued to insist that further testing of classroom air must occur before they will feel safe.

Karen Cahill, environmental engineer with the DEC, and Susan Shearer, assistant sanitary engineer with the Department of Health, presented the methods and results of testing for volatile organic compounds at South Hill Elementary School this summer.

South Hill Elementary underwent a series of tests for the compounds, including trichloroethylene or TCE, which was used by Morse Chain, the previous owner of Emerson Power Transmission until the late 1970s. Emerson, a state Superfund site, sits across Aurora Street from South Hill Elementary. TCE is considered a likely carcinogen.

TCE was detectable in samples outside the school and under the school's sub-slab but not at levels that concern the state officials. The "background" level for TCE that state officials consider omnipresent in urban, industrialized areas is 0.8 micrograms per cubic meter, Cahill said. The highest detection under the basement sub-slab was 1.1 micrograms per cubic meter. Inside the school's crawlspace air, there was no detection of TCE.

Some attendees at the meeting, including Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting, and Rich DePaolo, a South Hill parent, took issue with the state's definition of background because it is based on other samples of urban, industrialized areas.

In rural areas, there could likely be no detection of TCE or other volatile organic compounds whatsoever, they argued, and the state representatives confirmed this.

The compounds exist in virtually every industrialized area, Shearer said.

Cahill said she is the project manager for the Axiom/National Cash Register site, the NCR sewer, which runs partially along Aurora Street adjacent to the school, and the Emerson site. She said she works with contaminated Ithaca sites virtually every day.

"I've looked at a lot of soil vapor data in Ithaca," she said. "To be honest, when I saw that [South Hill Elementary] data, I was very happy."

Cahill said the DEC tested for 63 different compounds. TCE is the most commonly known compound in the South Hill area, because of the extensive contamination from the Emerson site. But other volatile

compounds can come from a variety of products, including unsealed gas cans, paint and paint remover, nail polish, refrigerants, carpets, floor wax and air fresheners.

Common Council alderwomen Maria Coles and Jennifer Dotson, both D-1st, represent South Hill. Along with half a dozen others at the meeting, they argued that further testing should occur at the school.

“It's very reassuring that what you have found so far is not as alarming as it might have been,” Coles said. But she said other testing related to the Emerson site has shown that air and soil vapor samples change with time and can give radically different readings on different days, weeks and months.

“This points to the need to test again and maybe again,” Coles said.

Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-125th, and County legislator Pam Mackesey, D-City of Ithaca, also attended to urge further testing.

The representatives from the state agencies repeatedly affirmed their belief that the school is safe.

Mark VanValkenburg, chief of the central section for the Department of Health and a public health specialist, said he would feel safe if the South Hill test results were from his own home.

“Yes absolutely. No question about it,” he said.

Cahill said as a state agency, their primary responsibility is to protect the environment, but a secondary responsibility is to be fiscally responsible with state tax dollars.

“It is taxpayer dollars,” Cahill said. “We don't want to spend state taxpayer dollars if it's not warranted.”

Cahill estimated that the initial testing done by Emerson on the school grounds cost approximately \$8,000. The indoor school testing carried out by the DEC cost \$22,000. Cahill said another round of testing, including indoor air, would cost more than \$22,000.

The DEC's initial tests did not include tests of indoor classroom air, as mandated by their “guidance for evaluating soil vapor intrusion,” Hang argued.

Cahill said they did not conduct classroom air testing because the tests were carried out during the summer, when the building is open and fresh air dissipates contaminants. Indoor air sampling is normally conducted during the heating season, when trapped air holds higher levels of contaminants.

DePaolo said that since the heating season has now begun, the state should spend the money and test the indoor classroom air, not assume that it is clean based on test results from the sub-slab and crawlspace air.

“You don't tell me I have a brain tumor by testing my neck,” he said.

Shearer said because the Ithaca City School District has not formally requested further testing, she could not definitively say that the state agencies would not pay for additional testing, but that the director of her bureau, the Bureau of Environmental Exposure Investigation, said testing funds would not be approved if the school district requests them.

“As of now our initial answer is no,” she said.

“You have to have core technical basis for the decisions you make,” Cahill added.

If the state agencies refused to pay for additional testing, the school district could pay for the testing itself.

Paul Mintz, the district's assistant superintendent for business services, said the money for testing would have to come from cuts in other programs in the operating budget. The Board of Education would decide whether to appropriate money for that purpose.

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