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Emerson finds small amounts of TCE at IPD station, courthouse

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Journal Staff

ITHACA — Test results show levels of contamination below those requiring mitigation at the Ithaca Police Department building and adjacent city courthouse.

Contaminant levels across Clinton Street in two police department storage sheds showed slightly higher levels of chemicals that will require continued monitoring.

The tests mark the furthest north consultants from Emerson Power Transmission have traveled to look for carcinogens and other chemicals historically released from the South Hill factory.

Of the contaminants the state considers potential constituents of concern, the highest concentration was of trichloroethylene underneath one of the shed floors. There, TCE levels were 24 micrograms per cubic meter; the clean up requirement is 250 micrograms per cubic meter.

Of the 88 readings for constituents of concern taken in January, only five were above 2.0 micrograms per cubic meter, meaning the majority were too low to require action.

About three years ago, Emerson Power Transmission stepped up its investigation into past chemical use at its plant when it became clear the mitigation system for a TCE-contaminated fire water reservoir was not operating effectively. The contamination occurred under the ownership of Morse Chain, which previously owned the site.

The chain manufacturing company used a number of solvents in addition to the likely carcinogen TCE in its operations. TCE and other chemicals have since shown up in the indoor air of homes downhill from the site and in the soil beneath homes.

Testing of the police station and courthouse was the first testing of an office building other than the factory property.

Police Chief Lauren Signer said Monday that she had not yet seen the results but was relieved to hear they were relatively low.

“These tests are not a big conversation topic here,” Signer said.

Part of the reason for that, according to Signer, is that representatives for Emerson told her that the city buildings were considered to be on the fringes of possible contamination.

Delineation of the contaminated area is one question Mayor Carolyn Peterson said she hopes will be answered with continued testing of the city facilities. Like many residents downhill from the factory, Peterson would like the plume of contamination defined, and there is notable interest in understanding what happens to the contaminants of concern when they reach Six Mile Creek, just north of the city

courthouse. It's not known for certain yet whether they would be carried downstream to Cayuga Lake or could cross to the other side of the creek.

In the five rounds of testing completed thus far, consultants started with the homes closest to the factory and have moved downhill from there.

Another round of testing will be done next fall on the city properties to provide another set of data.

“What we're finding is they've not reached the limit of where the chemicals might have traveled,” said Ken Deschere, a resident of the impacted neighborhood. “Obviously this stuff has not gone away and still is very much a concern.”

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