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Opinion - Tuesday, March 8, 2005

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Emerson, TCE and DEC Healthy cynicism prods government

EDITORIAL

More than a decade ago, experts from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation labeled a swath of Ithaca's South Hill as a "Class 4" hazardous waste site.

In the jargon of environmental cleanup, "Class 4" essentially means "case closed." The conservation department decided that levels of chemicals that were spilled decades ago by the former Morse Chain plant were at levels that posed an insignificant risk.

After hearing ongoing complaints and concerns from South Hill residents, state officials last year found rusting 55-gallon drums that contained -- or had contained -- chemicals that were used to degrease chains and other items manufactured at the plant. More seriously, levels of trichloroethylene (TCE) and other toxic substances connected with the plant were found in soil and area basements that were thousands of times above the acceptable limit.

In late February, the conservation department quietly announced that it was reclassifying the site from Class 4 to Class 2. A Class 2 site indicates that a case is far from closed -- and that the hazardous waste contained there "constitutes a significant threat to the environment" and requires immediate action and cleanup.

Despite advances in toxic chemical detection, the conservation department was remiss in stamping the South Hill pollution as a Class 4 site. It doesn't take high-tech equipment to find the rusting barrels that citizens stumbled upon on South Hill.

Had it not been for a vocal citizenry that persistently raised questions, a concerned mayor and environmental activists such as Walter Hang, the testing that is being conducted and the cleanup that reportedly is being planned would not be in motion.

The on-again, off-again saga of the pollution leaching from the old Morse Chain plant is not only an illustration of an industrial era's toxic legacy, but also more importantly, an emphatic affirmation of the need for citizens to

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question their government agencies and persist until their concerns are satisfactorily addressed.

Mr. Pataki: Don't dig us deeper

When George Pataki was elected as New York's 53rd governor in November 1994, he was hailed as a socially progressive yet fiscally conservative Republican who would bring the state's finances back into order. Today, in the midst of his third term, the state still faces a multi-billion-budget gap and a disturbing level of debt.

Granted, the Legislature is a major factor in the state of New York's finances, but the governor has the advantage of setting the stage for state spending through his executive budget and his office's veto power.

At issue is the governor's latest, \$105.2 billion spending plan for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. It purports to balance spending, but New York State Comptroller Alan Hevesi has issued a report on the executive budget that should raise alarms across the state.

Hevesi, a Democrat, has approached his job with a refreshing lack of partisanship, which lends credence to his latest warnings: While the governor's budget technically is in balance, it uses borrowing and deferred payments to achieve that state. Hence, if the budget were passed as is, the state could face a budget gap of \$11 billion within three years. Even more disturbing is Hevesi's conclusion that the latest executive budget would inflate the state's already unacceptable \$49 billion debt to a whopping \$54.6 billion after five years.

Hevesi's projections do not include the costs that will arise when the state eventually complies with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit in which a judge ruled that New York needs to funnel approximately \$5 billion to New York City schools.

Given the state's historic lack of action on tough fiscal decisions, the lawsuit payments may not hit the books for years, but when they do, it will have a negative impact throughout the state because there will be fewer dollars to go around for all public schools. Pataki's efforts to balance spending are admirable, but the tactic of once again using borrowing and debt to finance payments would be like an unemployed person using credit card debt to pay a mortgage. It's easy money up front, but the debt will soon swing back and hit you right between the eyes.

Just as a family needs to exercise often-unpleasant discipline in bringing home finances into line, the state must begin to enforce spending discipline.

Such discipline certainly will enrage some entrenched interests, but, like the homeowner immersed in credit card debt, the decision to pursue the status quo would be fiscally disastrous.

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