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Opinion - Thursday, April 21, 2005

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## Ithaca can be a model

WALTER HANG

GUEST COLUMNIST

In the year since I brought pollution hazards at the former Morse Chain factory to the public's attention, it has become apparent that coping with the site's lingering problems will be extraordinarily challenging. That is why I believe residents, responsible parties, government authorities and plant workers must do their utmost to forge a favorable resolution to this matter without further delay.

In 1987, high levels of a metal degreaser called trichloroethene were reportedly identified in oil partially skimmed from the factory's underground "fire reservoir." TCE is a common industrial solvent that is potentially cancer-causing, can impair the central nervous system and is associated with cardiac arrhythmias. It is highly persistent and migrates through soil and groundwater.

The fire reservoir reportedly leaked 1,100 gallons per day and caused extensive groundwater contamination. In 1991, the New York State Department of Health monitored a total of 10 homes downgradient of the factory and identified TCE in three homes. In 1994, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation adopted a Record of Decision that predicted the site would be remediated in three years or less. Ten years later, TCE vastly exceeded clean up standards.

Inexplicably, no effort was ever made to determine if toxics persisted in the air of nearby homes. A study required to assess soil gas vapor migration was never completed. The factory was simply one of hundreds of manufacturing sites, dry cleaners and toxic dumps whose solvent hazards were never remediated due to lax enforcement.

Recent monitoring of dozens of homes identified contaminants in indoor air, notably perchloroethylene and TCE, at concentrations exceeding background levels. Yet, vapor suppression systems have been installed in only a handful of residences, the full range of the site's hazards has yet to be determined and there is no agreement on how to mitigate or remediate the problems posed by the site.

Clearly much more needs to be done. I propose the following actions:



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First, all of the solvents ever used by the factory must be inventoried.

Second, a study must determine the full extent of those solvents in soil and groundwater surrounding the site.

Third, all homes located in the affected area must be monitored for toxic vapor intrusion.

Fourth, homes found to be threatened or affected by toxics must be equipped with vapor suppression systems or otherwise mitigated. The effectiveness of those systems must be verified on an on-going basis.

Parties that owned or operated the factory should be responsible for these efforts. If they are unwilling, the DEC should undertake the work or cooperate with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. That is how Ithaca Fall's \$4.8 million remediation was completed.

Cleaning up the actual factory site, however technically difficult and costly, could be warranted because vapor suppression or other mitigation efforts might not sufficiently protect local residents from long-term health risks. Extensive hazards also could lie beneath the factory and might threaten plant workers.

For decades, the facility reportedly released 300 gallons of cutting, lubricating and quench oils per day onto its property. Those oils ultimately leaked out into residential streets more than 600 feet away and migrated more than a mile via Six Mile Creek into the Cayuga Inlet. TCE was employed to try to clean up the factory's oil problems and ultimately made matters worse.

The factory has operated for nearly 100 years. It is imperative to know the full range of its hazards.

In 1980, the EPA required dumping disclosure pursuant to Section 103(c) of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act. In 1983, New York's Community Right to Know program similarly required disclosure of dumping practices from 1953 to 1983. The factory's owners and operators have failed to fulfill those obligations and should now be required to do so.

Finally, property values near the site must be protected. Responsible parties frequently offer financial settlements or insurance policies to safeguard the interests of local residents. Comprehensive protection should be afforded residents at no cost if they request it.

In conclusion, Ithaca's chain factory woes have lingered far too long and exemplify the shortcomings of New York's environmental, public health and worker protection program. If a favorable mitigation and clean up agreement could be achieved, it would provide a successful model that would be welcome across our state. I believe that goal is worthy of our community's aspirations.

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Walter Hang is the president of Toxics Targeting. This column is the full text of his written statement to the Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee meeting at 10:30 a.m. today in Ithaca Town Hall.

Emerson Power Transmission officials declined an invitation to write a guest view for today's edition.

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