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Opinion - Thursday, April 21, 2005

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TCE hearing: Why are we here today?

EDITORIAL

Good morning Chairman Tom DiNapoli, Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton and the rest of the state Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee.

First, thank you for coming to town to hear testimony about local soil contamination issues, most notably the still growing investigation into the release of trichloroethene -- the now infamous substance called TCE -- into the ground on the hillside overlooking the city of Ithaca's south side. The weight and the light this committee's public hearing will bring to this insidious public health threat is desperately needed.

That said, there's a question that has been nagging at us for more than 11 months since local environmental watchdog Walter Hang stood at the corner of South Cayuga Street and South Hill Terrace and woke us all up to the threat from a chemical considered dangerous to nerve, kidney, liver and heart function:

How did it all come to this?

Research by Hang and documents he helped The Journal obtain show that Tompkins County officials were sparring with Morse Chain as far back as the early 1960s about problems with oil and other chemicals leaking off the site and into the ground and area steams. Why didn't our public officials step in then to aggressively protect public health?

The state has been directly involved with this situation since 1987, after Emerson Power Transmission bought the property from Morse Chain and started looking into the problem. Why not step in then to aggressively protect public health?

In 1992, the Department of Environmental Conservation reclassified the site as one in need of only monitoring and said it would work out the details with Emerson. Why not step in then to aggressively protect public health?

More than a decade later, when a testing system was still not in place, why didn't anyone step in then to aggressively protect public health?

The threat to the environment has been known for 40 years. The possible danger to public health has been known for almost 20. Yet, from the '60s until Hang kicked you all in the rump 11 months ago -- just as he did over the Ithaca Gun lead problem -- this has been a low-key affair and countless residents of this community have been left at risk.

To be fair, Emerson didn't make this mess and they've done everything the state made them do; but why didn't the governments we rely on to protect public health make them do a lot more a lot sooner? Hang is a hero. Everyone in Ithaca who values his or her health should buy the man lunch. But why did so many institutions created to protect us need Hang to set off the chain of events that lead to the reclassification of the site as "significant threat to the environment" and the arrival of this committee here today?

We need aggressive action. We need the extent of TCE contamination fully defined and an aggressive remediation plan fully implemented. Do this, and area residents might feel safe again.

But beyond that, we need to know why so much has silently seeped by for so long, like the TCE under the city's south side, without our governments' alarm bells ever going off. Answer this, and area residents can be safe forever.

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