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Local News - Friday, April 22, 2005

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State admits Emerson slip-ups Special Assembly hearing focuses on New York's handling of TCE contamination

JENNIE DALEY
Journal Staff

ITHACA - State officials acknowledged Thursday that they need to "fix" their handling of the contaminated former Morse Chain site and their communications with affected residents.

Speaking at a public hearing on the infiltration of toxic vapors into indoor air, G. Anders Carlson, director of the Division of Environmental Health Investigation for the state Department of Health, cited the need for more effective dialogue with neighbors and a more aggressive approach to pursuing remediation of the site.

"I understand we need to do more to be responsive," Carlson said. "When we're dealing with older sites it doesn't feel like we're coming in new and that's why it slipped under the radar."

The state started investigating possible toxins at the factory more than two decades ago. It was not until last year that officials started to address the



MATTHEW HINTON / Journal Staff

South Hill resident Ken Deschere testifies about his rare form of cancer while fellow resident Janet Snoyer listens during a public hearing about Vaporization of Contamination from Soil and Groundwater at Ithaca Town Hall Thursday.



'The state has been unwilling to say 'You've got x number of days and, if you don't do it our way by then, forget it, we're going to do

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potential scope of contamination from trichloroethene, or TCE, a potentially carcinogenic solvent used by the former chain manufacturer.

Since then, testing that Carlson said the state "would have like to see done" by Emerson Power Transmission, which owns the site and is thus responsible for remediation, has not been completed. He also said some requests for home air testing have not been honored and that some areas, such as the former Research and Development lab at the north end of the Emerson property, need to be more closely examined.

"I think there are some issues we need to put more pressure on Emerson to deal with. I think you will see more aggressive action" from the state, he said.

These comments were entered on the record as part of the public hearing held by the New York State Assembly's Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation. The committee, represented at the hearing by Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-125th District, Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli, D-16th District, the committee chair, and Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, D-126th District, came to Ithaca to hear testimony in the second in a series of three hearings on vapor intrusion around the state.

Vapor intrusion gained increased national significance in 2003 when public health officials realized it could lead to much higher concentrations of contaminants in indoor air than previously expected. Ithaca began tangling with the issue when traces of TCE were found in the air of homes downhill from the Emerson factory on South Hill last year. The chemical can affect operations of the nervous system if inhaled in large quantities, though data on its health effects is still emerging.

For Ken Deschere, a South Hill resident who testified, these unspecified health concerns are at the root of his worries. In 2003, Deschere developed throat cancer of unknown origins. After 20 years working from his basement on South Hill Terrace, news of TCE concerns raised his suspicions and he asked that the air in his home be tested. While the Descheres were not included in the first round of testing, they were part of the second round and

it or get the EPA.' WALTER HANG, president, Toxics Targeting



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ANDERS CARLSON, state Department of Health



'We are trying to get a uniform approach to how we communicate that includes how are you going to inform residents.'
CARL JOHNSON, Dept. of Environmental Conservation

air samples were taken Feb. 10 and 11.

"That was nine weeks ago, and the results still have not been made available to us. This slow pace is adding to our anxiety," he said.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, submitted in his testimony that imposing deadlines is the only way he sees of fixing a broken process and getting answers in a reasonable time frame.

"The state has been unwilling to say 'You've got X number of days and, if you don't do it our way by then, forget it, we're going to do it or get the EPA.' We need to restructure the way we're dealing with these sites," he said.

At the end of the six-hour hearing, Lifton said she agreed.

"I want to find out what is a reasonable deadline then I'm going to be yelling and screaming until that deadline is met," she said. "I think the government needs to get responsible here. We need to step up enforcement of the law."

Sentiments such as these left Wendy Dugan with an uneasy optimism. Dugan grew up in the South Hill neighborhood and remembers playing on a shiny, oily hill below the factory.

"I'm very hopeful but I don't know why," she said.

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