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Uranium found near falls

Officials say radioactive materials don't pose any risk

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ITHACA — Recent testing near Ithaca Falls has revealed levels of radioactive materials that are higher than what is found naturally in most soils in the area. But those levels are not high enough to pose a significant radiation hazard, state environmental officials said Thursday.

At a news conference called Thursday by Ithaca Mayor Alan Cohen, Barbara Youngberg, chief of the state Department of Environmental Conservation's radiation section, said that the agency's radiological survey revealed uranium, radium and thorium as low as those naturally occurring in soils to as high as 30 times normal levels.

Neither the DEC nor the state Department of Health sees those levels as posing a significant radiation hazard to people visiting the area, Youngberg said. Still, the DEC is asking the EPA to remove the roughly 100-square-foot area containing radioactive material along with the lead-contaminated soil during its cleanup.

Youngberg also said that the radioactive materials found near the falls were not related to tests that the nearby Ithaca Gun Company conducted with uranium in 1961 and 1962.

The gun company, which relocated to King Ferry in the late 1980s, performed those tests for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. A 1995 radiological survey of the Ithaca Gun buildings showed no elevated radiation levels there. But until the DEC's radiological survey in October, no testing had been done in the steep, rocky area between the factory and the falls.

The DEC conducted that survey at the same time U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials were taking soil samples to determine the extent of contamination of lead from the former gun fac-



KATE SCHLEE/Journal Staff

The area of Ithaca Falls along Fall Creek gorge, located just below the old Ithaca Gun Factory (center) off Lake Street, has recently been the site of unnaturally high

radioactive readings. Officials from the state Department of Environmental Conservation said Thursday, however, those levels did not pose a significant radiation hazard.

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tory. The EPA plans to begin removing about an acre of lead-contaminated soil from city-owned property this March or April.

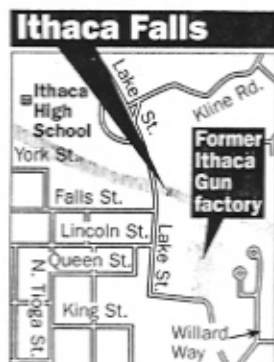
Youngberg said the DEC does not know where the radioactive materials, located

on a steep cliff south of the falls, came from, but said they could have come from some raw industrial materials or products once used nearby. Ithaca Falls was used as a source of hydropower by several different factories, grist

and paper mills from the early 19th century to the late 1950s.

Youngberg was joined Thursday by officials from the DEC, EPA, state Department of Health and Cornell University, which sold about 10 acres of the falls area to the city for \$1. Cohen said Thursday that transaction took place in February.

The city knew of the lead contamination and planned to clean it up under the state's Brownfields program, which



RONSON SLAGLE/Journal Staff

See FALLS, 4A

Falls

(Continued from Page 1A)

would have reimbursed the city for 75 percent of cleanup costs. But at the state's request, the EPA decided last September to clean up the polluted soil — where arsenic also has been found — with money from the federal Superfund program. The agency would then seek reimbursement from the parties it deemed responsible for the contamination.

Thursday, Walter Hang —an Ithaca activist and businessman who drew public attention to the lead contamination — criticized the city's decision to purchase the land from Cornell. He fears that the city could be deemed one of those responsible parties, although the EPA has said it historically does not go after municipalities.

"Mayor Cohen's extraordinarily bad judgment has saddled Ithaca

with a city park that is not only dangerously contaminated with lead and arsenic, but radioactive as well," Hang said.

However, the city's plans to purchase the Ithaca Falls area from Cornell date back to the early 1990s, while Cohen took office in 1995. Along with land in the Six Mile Creek watershed, the falls area was intended to be substitute parkland for Inlet Island in the city's West End, which city officials feel is more suited to commercial development.

In an interview after the press conference, Cohen defended the purchase of the falls area.

"Even though the decision to acquire the property was made prior to my administration, I think it was a good decision," he said. "Ithaca Falls is a community resource and treasure and deserves to be held in the public domain."