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Emerson: TCE at school from old NCR factory

By Krisy Gashler

Journal Staff

ITHACA — Low levels of TCE contamination found at South Hill Elementary School likely came from a sewer line from the old National Cash Register factory, rather than from Emerson Power Transmission, according to a Wednesday press release from Emerson.

Emerson collected six soil vapor samples on school grounds to test for trichloroethylene, or TCE, and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs). TCE was used by Emerson's previous owner, Morse Chain, to degrease parts until the late 1970s. It is considered a likely carcinogen.

TCE was detectable at every location, but at levels that the state Departments of Health and Environmental Conservation say requires no further remediation.

The sewer line ran down the southeast portion of the EPT property, then down South Aurora Street, adjacent to the school, according to the Emerson release.

“What we're saying is that someplace upgrading from the sewer line from the EPT property, there's been a discharge into the sewer line of some VOCs,” said Derek Chase, director of environmental affairs at Emerson.

The old NCR factory is owned by the South Hill Business Campus. South Hill brought a lawsuit against NCR in 2006 seeking \$50 million in damages to help South Hill clean up the old contamination.

Andrew Sciarabba, the managing partner of South Hill Business Campus, said the matter has been resolved between the two parties, but he could not specify details of their arrangement.

If pollution at South Hill Elementary School or anywhere else near NCR's sewer line requires testing or mitigation, Emerson contends that they should not be responsible because the EPT factory site has never been connected to that sewer line.

When asked whether NCR or South Hill Business Campus would be financially responsible for any potential testing or cleanup, Sciarabba would not comment and referred The Journal to South Hill's environmental remediation consultant, S&W Redevelopment.

A representative from S&W Redevelopment was unavailable for comment Thursday.

Mary Jane Peachey, a DEC regional engineer who has worked on contamination testing at South Hill, neither agreed nor disagreed with Emerson's contention that pollution near the old sewer line is not their responsibility.

“Someone else may be a contributor,” she said. “We have looked at that data here at DEC and believe that additional investigation is warranted.”

Ken Deschere, a South Hill resident and TCE environmental activist, said regardless of who's to blame, he wants additional testing and, if necessary, remediation.

“Fixing the blame for where it's coming from may be important in terms of determining financial liability, but fixing the problem should be the major concern,” he said.

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