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Toxic dump found under Horseheads High sports fields

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JASON WHONG / Staff Photo

In this view looking southeast from Thorne Street Park in Horseheads, football players warm up before practice behind the baseball field Thursday at Horseheads High School. The field sits atop a former landfill.

Horseheads school officials are searching for answers after learning this week that part of the high school property sits on an old toxic waste dumpsite.

But state environmental officials say the presence of the site is not cause for immediate concern.

The issue was raised in a letter to the school district from Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting Inc., an Ithaca environmental firm.

Hang was doing research on the proposed Schlumberger site in the village of Horseheads when he stumbled across an unexpected find -- the presence of a three-acre hazardous substance waste disposal site that lies underneath the high school sports fields.

A profile sheet on file with the state Department of Environmental Conservation indicates the waste site is located in the southwest portion of the Horseheads High School athletic fields and was a small landfill or dump in the early 1960s.

The site was eventually covered with clean fill before being converted to athletic fields.

Hang said he is alarmed by some of the chemicals that linger somewhere underground there.

"When you look at the substances that were disposed, it's really troubling because you have old pesticides like DDT, mercury, toluene and a whole variety of polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons," Hang said.

"These are very toxic chemicals that are in cigarette smoke and they cause lung cancer.

"That was a site that was very polluted with toxic chemicals, but for some unknown reason they determined that material did not constitute hazardous waste," he said.

"When the original state Superfund was adopted, this site and maybe a thousand others did not qualify for available cleanup dollars. For some reason, it just was not determined to be hazardous waste that could tap into the dedicated fund."

Report raises questions

There is a small wetland near the western boundary of the property and beyond that is Thorne Street Park, which belongs to the Village of Horseheads.

The history of the site in question is unclear, and Mayor Don Zeigler said he was not aware of any former toxic dump in that area before Hang raised the issue.

Nor were school officials aware, but now they are trying to find out more about the dumpsite before deciding the next step.

"We're still investigating the matter. We take it very seriously. We are working with DEC," said Horseheads School Superintendent Ralph Marino.

"We are still looking for someone to tell us where it is. We're asking for the coordinates of it. It's been reconfigured a lot since 1964. We'll rely on DEC to provide us that information. We want to get the information from them."

In the meantime, parents and students shouldn't be alarmed until the school district can pin down more specific information, Marino said.

"We really want to know the location of it. There may be a building on it," he said. "We need to verify that. Someone needs to produce something. Three acres is a large piece of land. And it's been developed over the years."

DEC responds

The state is aware of the site but has not pursued remediation for several reasons, said Bart Putzig, DEC regional remediation engineer.

Initially, no funding was in place to investigate and clean up sites like this, Putzig said.

Now that money is available for these projects, it's a matter of prioritizing, and it's a long list, he said.

"It's now part of a group of potential sites to be investigated by DEC. There are 42 in our region. We are looking at them on a prioritized basis," Putzig said.

"This is a lower priority site. The data we have in front of us don't show a significant threat. The contaminants shown here are not very mobile. There's not great concern in terms of exposure issues at this point in time.

"If I don't have any more data than this, than there are other places where we need to spend our funds."

More serious contamination areas are located south of the high school location, such as the old Kentucky Avenue wellfield sites in Horseheads and Elmira Heights, Putzig said.

But DEC's own fact sheet indicates the threat of direct contact at the high school site because it is an athletic field.

That report was prepared in 1994 and the file was never updated, Putzig said. The Environmental Protection Agency might have more information about it, he said.

DEC reviews the hazardous substance site list regularly and will address the Horseheads location if any circumstances change, he said.

But in his letter to the school district, Hang urges that school officials demand remedial action be taken as soon as possible.

"This issue was recognized years ago and this site was investigated around 1994. So there is no reason why this site, based on available data, shouldn't have been investigated and cleaned up, given that it's at a school where young children could be threatened," Hang said.

"I mean frankly, it's shocking. Normally, this should have been a top priority."