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Ithaca's South Hill buoyed on TCE issue

EPA now classifies chemical as carcinogen

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Ithaca -- Ithaca activists say the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's announcement of a new health assessment for trichloroethylene labeling it as a known carcinogen is a moral victory but not all that useful in efforts to clean up the South Hill neighborhood.

Trichloroethylene, or TCE, was used by the Morse Chain factory, which occupied the facility now known as the former Emerson Power Transmission plant. Use of the chemical ended in the late 1970s, but it remains at the site and downhill from it, in the soil and rock beneath the South Hill neighborhood.

Residents have long fought with Emerson to have the site and neighborhood remediated, some saying the company's plan is not aggressive enough.

The change in TCE's health assessment may be little more than a vindication for those residents.

"We can say we told you so and it's overdue in coming," said Ken Deschere, a South Hill resident and founder of Ithaca South Hill Industrial Pollution. "I think the validation makes our case even more serious, and shows we shouldn't let our guard up."

Deschere said the implications of the change in the EPA's health assessment of TCE increase the pressure on Emerson to "get things cleaned up."

Toxics Targeting President Walter Hang said the change will not help South Hill residents significantly.

The real victory was blocking a plan to place a passive ventilation system along a sewer main on South Hill, Hang said.

"By blocking that shockingly inadequate remedial proposal, we will have an opportunity to have the new mayor and incoming Common Council address this matter in a meaningful way," Hang said. Hang said he believes the only way to effectively remove the contaminant is by removing the shale it's in.

A spokesman for Emerson, David Baldrige, said, "It's our understanding the EPA has always recognized TCE as a carcinogen -- whether known or suspect -- and that's always been Emerson's approach. We have always been aggressive in how we have handled the remediation project in Ithaca, and this latest development will not change that commitment. We'll continue to comply with directives from environmental regulators for our remediation work in Ithaca."