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Local News - Thursday, March 17, 2005

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Residents getting no satisfaction from state, Emerson

JENNIE DALEY

Journal Staff

ITHACA -- With only one house between his home and the test zone, Rick Grossman has been pushing hard to have his family's Park Street residence examined for contamination that originated at the former Morse Chain plant. So far, all he has been told is that two monitoring wells are going in nearby.

"We're worried about our health, especially of our kids. Every day of waiting is one of wondering what's happened and if it is still happening," Grossman said.

Like many in the area, Grossman has repeatedly called the New York State Department of Conservation, the New York State Department of Health and Emerson Power Transmission representatives. With most calls he seeks updates on the project's progress but said he feels he has gotten little information to date.

What residents do know is that a second round of testing is nearing completion and officials are preparing to analyze those results before determining the boundaries for a third phase of testing. In the meantime, two new monitoring wells are scheduled to go in at the corner of South Albany at Park and Wood streets.

Grossman and his neighbors are concerned because, within a block from their homes, traces of trichloroethene, or TCE, have been found in residences. TCE was used by the former Morse Chain plant to degrease chains made on site. The solvent has been found at actionable levels in the air of three homes below the factory. Inhalation of large quantities of TCE can cause nerve damage and has been linked to cancers in lab animals. Exposure is of particular concern for children, the elderly and those with existing health conditions, according to the DOH.

Walter Hartman, who lives on Wood Street with his family -- which includes their 18-month-old baby -- has water flowing underneath his basement floor. He was told at the beginning of the month that the water would be tested for TCE but he hasn't heard from any officials yet.

"This has been ridiculous," he said. "We feel like we're just being ignored. I'm considering doing remediation myself because to get something like that from



the DEC will take forever. A mitigation system may decrease the value of my home but I've got to care for the health of my family."

Hartman and several others in the neighborhood are reminded daily of the potential contamination when they look up the hill and see the Emerson plant.

"We're right at the bottom of the hill. I've talked to the Carl (Cuipylo, a DEC geologist) and he said geologically there's no reason to preclude testing here," said Sabrina Johnston, Grossman's next-door neighbor.

But residents are still waiting, hoping their home will make it into the next round of testing.

James Gillett, a professor of ecotoxicology at Cornell University who is assisting neighbors with technical aspects of the investigation, is not optimistic. Faced with the limited resources of the DEC and the Department of Health, and a company he described as less than forthcoming, Gillett doesn't see a quick resolution to the issue.

"Right now, New York state sucks," Gillett said. "They're incapable of doing what's legitimate and reasonable."

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