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Nice Home - Tough sell S. Hill spill affecting housing market

By **JENNIE DALEY**
Journal Staff

ITHACA — One family already backed out of buying Mary Beth O'Connor's arts and crafts bungalow on South Hill Terrace. With a new baby and worries about contamination from the Emerson Power Transmission plant, the family felt they couldn't make the commitment.

A couple of blocks down South Hill Terrace, George and Mary Atrio started Sunday to move their son, an Ithaca College junior, into the second home they recently bought. After investigating the contamination and talking with various officials, the couple felt comfortable enough to make the investment.

These two situations, just yards away from each other, highlight the uncertain housing market that took over this South Hill neighborhood soon after contamination was found spreading down the hill from the former Morse Chain plant.



SIMON WHEELER/Journal Staff

Mary Beth O'Connor is looking to sell her craftsman style bungalow on the corner of South Hill Terrace and Turner Street in Ithaca. O'Connor has been watering the gardens around the house planted by a previous owner.



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While the initial problem came from a leak identified in 1987, it was only last year that a neighborhood outcry led to expanded testing. Indoor air tests were looking primarily for evidence of trichloroethene, or TCE. A possible carcinogen, TCE can affect cognitive ability and the nervous system after long-term exposure. The chemical was a component used to degrease chain when the plant was owned by Morse Chain. Emerson bought the property, and inherited the problem, in 1983.

The neighborhood is waiting for the next round of tests, which are slated for October, the start of the heating season.

O'Connor's house is one of those expected to be tested again. In her most recent results, taken earlier this year, almost all chemical levels inside the house were below state standards. Beneath the concrete slab in her basement, readings were much higher. The disparity between the indoor and sub-slab readings suggested that her cement floor serves as an effective barrier to vapor intrusion.

Nonetheless, since June, O'Connor has had few nibbles on a house full of appealing details. There's a patchwork-painted porch, original light fixtures and leaded windows, which all add character to the home. The packet of information about the testing that she is obligated to disclose is less charming.

"When I put the house on the market in the end of June, it was way past the end of the season, so there's that. But I do think that the Emerson situation is an impact. It's a great house. It would be a shame ..." she said, leaving her sentence unfinished.

Another South Hill resident, Ken Deschere, bought a South Hill Terrace home with his wife in 1981. They have no plans to move anytime soon.

"Before the news of the tests and the test results, all the houses around here sold for above the asking price. One house sold in less than a week. Recently a house down the road finally sold after quite a while, and I think he barely got his money back," Deschere said. "The feeling is this neighborhood is not considered as desirable as it once was. It does seem the perceived values have changed drastically."

Assessment department officials aren't convinced that's true. A house on West Spencer Street, which is within the investigation area, sold this month for \$117,000, according to Jay Franklin, assistant director of the assessment department. That was \$32,000 above the asking price.

"This is one of the nicest parts of town. The best thing is the vast majority of testing has shown there's not much to be concerned about," said Bill Kaupe, a long-time resident of South Cayuga Street. "This whole neighborhood has gotten tarred by this problem, and it's just not born out by the facts."

For realtors and assessors, it's a much grayer reality. They evaluate the impacts of pollution on home sales on a case-by-case basis.

"It depends. To some buyers, living next to a cemetery is enough to rule out a house. Other people may have no problem with that. It's a case-by-case situation," said Diane Cooper, sales manager for Audrey Edelman and Associates RealtyUSA.

In the case of the Atrios, extensive research gave them enough information to feel as though they understood the risk they were taking, which, in their case, they see as minimal.

Based in Miami, the couple viewed the home, which had been on the market for a while and dropped in price, as a good investment. After two rounds of test, no chemicals were found at levels they felt were problematic. Talks with the Departments of Health and Environmental Conservation, reinforced this perception.

"We love Ithaca. We love South Hill. We understand that the spill is, was and will be," George Atrio said. "We live in a polluted world."

The Atrios both said they will be keeping a close eye on the situation; their neighbors on both sides were designated for continued monitoring.

"If my son starts to feel sick," Mary Atrio said, "I have no problem going right out and sticking a for sale sign on the lawn."

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