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Local News - Friday, March 4, 2005

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State plots next step in cleanup

JENNIE DALEY

Journal Staff

ITHACA -- The mild satisfaction felt by Jofish Kaye at the end of an information session on testing related to the Emerson Power Transmission site was common among the many residents in attendance.

Kaye was one of more than 70 people who showed up Thursday night at the Tompkins County Health and Human Services Building to hear a presentation by the New York State departments of Health and Environmental Conservation. The talk outlined results from the first phase of home air testing and laid out some steps anticipated in the near future.

"I felt it was reasonably productive; I didn't expect any revelations," Kaye said. "We have a community here that is very engaged in this and we're hearing a lot that decisions can't be made right now, which is very frustrating to hear. There's a lot of frustration with the bureaucratic process."

Kaye lives in one of 49 homes that recently underwent a second round of testing for site-related chemicals of concern in the residences.



IRINA PERESS/Journal Staff

Homeowner Jofish Kaye, left, talks about test results of groundwater with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation professional engineer James Burke during the Emerson Power Transmission availability session Thursday afternoon at the Tompkins County Human Services Building on State Street.

Of most interest to officials and residents are four chemicals that showed up with the most frequency -- 1,1,1-trichloroethane, methylene chloride, perchloroethene -- often referred to as PERC, and trichloroethene, or TCE.

TCE has been the most talked about since a significant leak from a firewater reservoir was identified on the Emerson property in 1987. A solvent that was used to degrease chains when the plant was owned by Morse Chain, TCE can cause dizziness and damage to the central nervous system if inhaled in large quantities. The peak usage of the solvent was in the late 1970s.

Levels of TCE just over the DOH's actionable level of 5 micrograms per cubic meter led to Emerson installing a vapor mitigation system in Janet Snoyer's home on South Hill Terrace this winter. Two other homes were offered mitigation systems -- both for high PERC levels -- but have put off installation temporarily.

Now neighbors want to know what will happen next. The DEC recently added seven homes for testing in Phase II, most of them located on the north side of Hillview Place and now discussion has moved on to the scope of Phase III.

While Geoffrey Laccetti and Henriette Hamel, both from the state DOH, acknowledged they want to expand the testing area in the next phase, they had little information as to what the expansion would encompass.

"We're not going to go across the river because I think that's a good divide. I also want to require more testing in the Park Street area," said Hamel, the regional coordinator for environmental health assessment.



'I came here to get more information. I have three small children who reside within the testing area, and I've never been contacted about having my house tested. They should be calling people.' – John Criscitello, Ithaca



'It looks like the TCE is the main problem, but there are other chemicals that need to be looked into and quantified. The long-term effect is what I'm worried about. My mother has lived in this area for 45 years.' - Wendy Kimble-Dugan, Cayuga Heights

"We don't have data that demonstrates we don't have to go down there," Laccetti, chief of the DOH's southern section bureau of environmental exposure, added. "We've had questions about that and it's our responsibility to answer with scientific information, not 'We don't think so.'"

Audience members also raised the possibility of including areas on both sides of South Geneva Street south of South Titus Avenue and the need for more monitoring wells around Turner Place.

Officials promised nothing but said they would look into the suggestions and come to a decision about the scope of Phase III collaboratively.

As for work on Emerson property, the company recently submitted a work plan to expand the scope of investigative work and it is being considered by the DEC, according to Derek Chase, director of environmental affairs for Emerson.

For the work plan, like the implementation of Phase III, officials were unable to offer a time line for completion. The next quantifiable progress expected is the sharing of results from the second round of testing, which should be available "very soon," said Hamel.

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'In general people seem to be doing their best here. The big question is what the appropriate levels are in monitoring TCE. What are the levels above which you say, there's a problem.' – Jofish Kaye, Ithaca

Why it matters

Emerson Power Transmission has been working with New York State since 1987 to clean up trichloroethene, or TCE.

- **WHAT:** TCE is of concern because it can cause dizziness and damage to the central nervous system if inhaled in large quantities.
- **SCOPE:** While Emerson has been working on site to remediate TCE contamination, the extent of the leak led to tests of soil gas vapors and ground water downhill from the factory's Aurora Street location. The wells went into effect in early 2004 and evidence from them led to sampling of the air quality in 43 residences in the fall of 2004. A second round of testing, incorporating an added seven homes, finished last month.

RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT

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