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Local News - Wednesday, May 19, 2004

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Toxics watchdog urges clean-up Solvent runoff from Emerson factory seen as health risk

By Roger DuPuis II
Journal Staff

ITHACA -- A local company that tracks toxic sites across New York is calling for better clean-up practices around a century-old factory in the Town of Ithaca.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, believes that efforts to remediate toxic solvent contamination around Emerson Power Transmission's facility on Danby Road over the past decade have been deficient. It sits uphill from residential neighborhoods around West Spencer Street.

"I'm calling on the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the responsible party and the Environmental Protection Agency to clean this site up with no further delay," Hang said.

Hang will hold a 10:45 a.m. news conference today at the intersection of South Cayuga Street and South Hill Terrace in Ithaca, downgrade from the factory site.



KATE SCHLEE/Journal Staff

This photo, taken on Tuesday, shows where the house on 213 W. Spencer St. used to stand. The home was demolished as part of a road-widening project. Homes in the area lie downhill -- and in one of the estimated paths -- of a plume of toxic solvent contamination from nearby Emerson Power Transmission.



BILL WARREN/Journal Staff

This photo, taken on Feb. 24, 2003,

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He said evidence shows that trichloroethylene, or TCE, contamination at the site vastly exceeds prescribed clean-up amounts nearly 17 years after the spill was first documented, and 10 years after a DEC record of decision set forth clean-up terms for the site.

shows the house at 213 W. Spencer St. where the Dahl family used to live. One of the Dahls' sons young suffered an apparent heart attack last year. While no cause has ever been determined, cardiac arrhythmia is one possible health ailment caused by the solvent, trichloroethylene.

TCE was used to clean grease from metal chains manufactured at the plant until 1983. In 1987, it was found to have leaked into surrounding soil and groundwater from an underground fire water reservoir.

Hang pointed to scientific studies which show the chemical can cause central nervous system disorders, cardiac arrhythmia, cancer, liver damage and other ailments.

"Emerson has been conducting a remediation project at the Ithaca site for years, beginning in 1992," Emerson spokesman Dave Baldrige said. "We've been in compliance with the state's record of decision for remediation that was issued in 1994."

He pointed out that DEC approved the firm's remedial plan.

Former West Spencer Street resident Laurie Dahl worries about what impact the chemicals may have had on her young son's health.

The family moved to 213 W. Spencer St. in 1999, when he was six. They moved out last summer, after the city acquired the home through eminent domain proceedings as part of a road-widening project.

In February 2003, the son's heart stopped one day at school. Quick action by school officials and paramedics saved his life, she said, but they estimated his heart was not beating for more than four minutes. To this day, she said, doctors -- including heart specialists -- have not been able to give an explanation why the boy's heart stopped. She said he was last hospitalized for a heart episode in May 2003, but has not had any more incidents since the family moved to a new home.

Hang feels it's time to go back and review the plan for compliance with DEC standards. He pointed to a February progress report on the remediation system submitted to Emerson by URS Corporation. According to that document, TCE levels at one test site were as high as 28,000 parts per billion in December 2003. New York's groundwater clean-up standard for TCE is five parts per billion.

Hang said he hopes the DEC will review the data and upgrade the site's classification code from four to two. A four-ranked site requires continued management. A two-ranked site is considered a significant threat to public health or the environment.

DEC Region 7 engineer Mary Jane Peachey, whose jurisdiction includes Tompkins County, said her agency would be very interested in obtaining

any relevant new data Hang can offer them about the site's condition.

"Can it be done? Yes," she said of upgrading the site status. "It can be done based on new information."

Dahl -- who learned about the contamination only after she found information buried in an environmental impact report for the road project -- wants to see the neighborhood properly informed of any dangers which might exist.

"I feel that, for my family, and my son, and for the people that still live in the neighborhood," Dahl said, "I would like to see a long-term health study done."

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Originally published Wednesday, May 19, 2004



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