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N. Meadow Street home to get Superfund status

Perchloroethylene, TCE levels vastly exceed allowable limit

By JENNIE DALEY
Journal Staff

ITHACA — Audrey Whyte isn't worried — yet.

She knows it's not great that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation recently tested her home for toxic chemicals. Yet, the daycare center she operates from her house on North Meadow Street is doing fine, and she has plenty of friends who stop by regularly.

Outside her pale green home, surrounded by a bright menagerie of toys, conversation is about the toddlers driving plastic cars, the upcoming women's conference she's organizing and errands to run — not carcinogens.

The particular chemical, and possible carcinogen, the DEC is looking for in her house is perchloroethylene or any of its byproducts. Better known as perc, the chemical is widely used by dry cleaners like the one that, decades ago, was next door to Whyte's property.

"I do take care of children here. It's not just me and my child, but other people's children too," Whyte said. "They said I don't really need to send out an alert and cause hysteria about something that might not even be



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here. But, if they do find something, they said they'll sit down with me and my parents.”

Numbers found next door in 2001 indicate there may be reason for Whyte to clear the table and brew a pot of coffee. Four years ago, vinyl chloride, a known human carcinogen, was discovered at 870 parts per billion in the groundwater. The allowable limit is 2 parts per billion, or ppb — 14,000 ppb of cis-1,2-dichloroethene was found. The allowable limit for this potential carcinogen is 5 ppb.

Trichloroethene, better known as TCE, was also present. This chemical, which has been showing up in homes on South Hill after a spill at the former Morse Chain plant, was at 1,400 ppb. The allowable limit is also 5 ppb.

These three chemicals are each a byproduct of perc when it breaks down. The levels of perc in 2001 were 1,400 parts per billion when, again, the allowable limit is 5 ppb.

All of this led the DEC, in a document made public Thursday, to recommend the site be listed as Class 2 in the state Superfund program. This means the DEC sees it is a “significant threat to the public health or environment” and a threat requiring action. The former Morse Chain plant, now owned by Emerson Power Transmission, was the most recent local site to earn this classification.

In the meantime, the DEC tested four other homes this summer and the Thai Garden restaurant, which is immediately to the south of the former dry cleaner. All of the test sites are waiting for results, which should be available by early October.

Once known as Meadow Street Cleaners and Tailor, the old dry cleaner was in operation from about 1961 to 1977 at 507 N. Meadow St. The gray cinderblock building now there houses Allstate Insurance, Pella Windows and Doors and Ithaca Cardiology Associates.

The cardiology office has a vapor mitigation system installed in its basement. While no one from the doctors' office was available for comment Thursday evening, the presence of this system, which prohibits soil gases from entering a building, suggests the owners had knowledge of the contamination prior to the current investigation.

A number of factors show officials also knew of this contamination at least since the testing in 2001, but no action was taken until this summer. A history of the site shows that the 2001 analysis was requested by a buyer interested in the property, which was on the market at that time. When the contamination was discovered, the buyer backed out, leaving Benny Campagnolo, the owner, with a polluted property.

Campagnolo did not return repeated phone calls, but Diane Carlton, a spokesperson for the DEC, said he entered the state's Voluntary Cleanup Agreement in January 2004. Since then, he has dropped out of the program because the cleanup became too costly.

The state then took over the investigation and remediation in June of this year and has spent \$25,000 so far, according to Carlton. Some of that money went to installing four soil-gas monitoring wells near the site. Three of the wells are spaced out along the west side of North Meadow

Street between Esty and Cascadilla Streets. The fourth is partway down the north side of Esty Street between North Meadow and North Fulton streets.

Despite this work beginning in June, it wasn't until late Thursday afternoon that any information on the contamination or investigation was available to the public.

Walter Hang, of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, verified the perc investigation early this week and spent many hours looking for documents to back the verbal confirmation he'd been given.

"This is the classic 'Why did they wait so long?' Hang said. "How come it wasn't taken care of quickly with all the sensitive receptors around? The government should've alerted the public before proceeding with their investigation. Clearly the public was kept in the dark."

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