

## Toxic fumes that won't fade away

### State agencies plan to identify sites where traces of contaminants may have migrated, posing a health hazard

BY BILL BLEYER  
STAFF WRITER

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Until three years ago, public health officials thought that when they had cleaned up spilled toxic solvents in the ground, their work was done. But then they learned about "vapor intrusion."

That is a process where the remaining traces of contaminants -- such as tetrachloroethylene -- form a gas that migrates through the soil into adjacent structures, creating a health hazard. Some of the chemicals are known carcinogens and others could create other health problems.

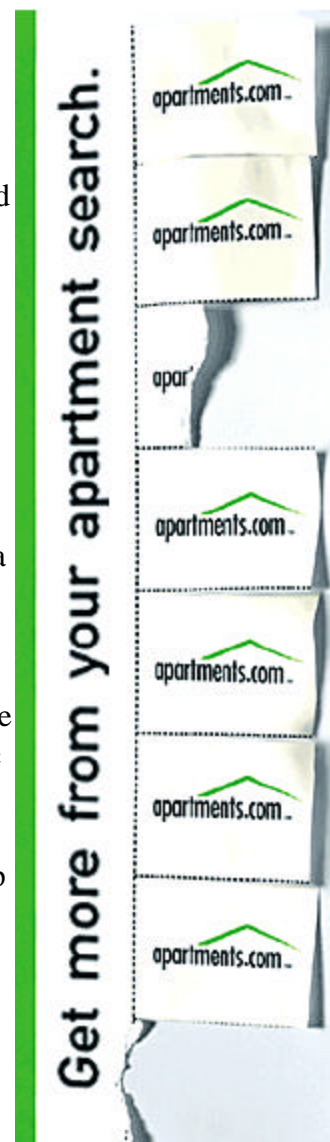
So the state environmental conservation and health departments are finalizing a plan for dealing with the problem by the end of the year.

At the same time, the agencies are prioritizing a list of 421 toxic sites -- including 89 on Long Island and 11 in New York City -- where cleanups were completed or planned before 2003 and now need to be re-examined for toxic fumes.

In a few cases, such as a former IBM site in upstate Endicott, a vapor cleanup is already under way at 441 properties above a 300-acre plume. And some other sites, including a dry cleaning company in Port Washington and an industrial site in New Cassel, are being studied to develop vapor cleanup plans.

"The state is being more aggressive than other states, and that's a good thing," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, an environmental database firm in Ithaca, said there are sites



on Long Island where solvent vapors have intruded from soil into libraries, a tennis academy and a temple.

"The problem has been that the state never had an overall program to try to look back at these sites that they once determined had been cleaned up," he said. "Now, for the first time, it appears that we have a comprehensive review of all of the sites that in many cases have been known about for decades to find out whether or not people are actually breathing these solvent fumes in their homes and other buildings.

"The question is, how are they going to clean up these problems if they find widespread vapor intrusion?"

Maureen Wren, spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said her agency and the health department are reviewing the proposed policy as well as recommendations in a report issued last month by the Assembly environmental conservation committee.

"We'll be addressing the sites with the greatest potential first," said Wren, who noted that toxic sites identified since 2003 have been examined for vapor intrusion.

Assemb. Thomas DiNapoli (D-Great Neck), chairman of the environmental conservation committee, said the panel recommended "that if you detect the chemical, you should go right to mitigation because the cost of mitigation and monitoring are pretty similar."

The committee also stressed that the state agencies need to make sure residents and businesses have full and timely information about contaminants.

Paul Granger, superintendent of the Plainview Water District, which has 14 sites on the state list, said he welcomed any action that protects the community.

"We were aware of issues surrounding the water quality for quite some time and took the initiative to correct it immediately. When we noticed the water quality was diminishing, we put treatment systems in place. The water is absolutely safe to drink," he said. "I'm glad they are at least coming back to check."

According to Carl Johnson, DEC deputy commissioner for air and waste management, the proposed policy calls for "the party responsible for contaminating the site to pay for and perform the vapor intrusion evaluation, as well as ... monitoring of any mitigation system which would be required." If that's not possible, the state would step in.

The mitigation methods include sealing foundation cracks and adjusting heating, ventilation or air-conditioning systems to prevent vapor infiltration.

Staff writer Deborah S. Morris contributed to this story.

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