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Metro

Residents updated on Woonasquatucket cleanup

After extensive testing, only trace amounts of dioxin is found south of the original contamination site.

09/04/2002

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NORTH PROVIDENCE -- Elizabeth Raposa, 71, is aware of the toxins in the soil near her home at Brook Village next to the contaminated Woonasquatucket River.

Like many of the elderly residents at the housing complex and the neighboring Centredale Manor, she wants to stay informed about the federal cleanup.

"We've got to know," she said. "It's our health, too, you know."

Yesterday, Raposa was among residents who packed community rooms at both housing complexes to hear an update on the project from representatives of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Environmental Management and the companies hired to test soil and remedy the contamination.

Mayor A. Ralph Mollis organized the sessions.

"I get to see a lot of you at the Senior Center or at different town functions," he told residents at Centredale Manor. "One of the most frequently asked questions I get is, 'How is it going with the Woonasquatucket River?'"

The levels of toxins in the river silt alarmed the EPA enough in 1999 to cordon off an area behind Centredale Manor; a year later, the area was designated a Superfund site.

William Steinhauer, a chemist with the environmental firm Battelle, of Duxbury, Mass., hired by the government, explained the work of the past year.

Thirty-three test wells were drilled around Brook Village and Centredale Manor; soil samples and ground-water samples were tested to see whether ground water flowing south through a sieve of gravel and silt carried contaminants, such as dioxin, with it.

The results, he said, were heartening: only trace amounts of dioxin were found south of the original contamination site.

There was one polluted hot spot in the Brook Manor parking lot, probably from industrial activity years ago, Steinhauer said. But asphalt covers that spot, protecting passersby from the toxins.

In the next year, he said, each of the wells will be retested, and soil samples

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in the next year, he said, each of the ponds will be tested, and soil samples will be taken from behind Centredale Manor. Then, he said, the EPA would have enough data to determine how to clean up the area.

Scott Miller, a project manager from LEA-Cianci Inc, of Plainville, Conn. -- a company hired by a group of corporations that he said were "possibly responsible" for the dioxin pollution, spoke next.

His company replaced the Allendale Dam last year, he explained, submerging tainted soil and protecting the public from contamination.

This year, he said, LEA-Cianci will be excavating more dioxin-rich soil from houses on the east side of the old raceway behind Centredale Manor.

They will also take pontoons onto Allendale pond to dredge soil samples from the bottom.

Raposa wanted to know whether the dioxins could be inhaled. Was the toxin the culprit behind her lung condition? she asked.

No, Steinhauer said. Dioxins bind to particles of sediment and would only get into the air as dust. Because much of the contaminated soil is mud, there isn't much possibility of breathing it in, he told her.

Others wondered whether the water supply was safe.

It was, they were told. Tap water doesn't come from the Woonasquatucket.

Cornell Rosiu, of the EPA, said he thought the session was a good idea.

"When you're working on a site, sometimes you lose perspective," he said. "The residents always bring you back to the more common concerns that members of the public would have."

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