



# ITHACA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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TO: Concerned Members of the South Hill Elementary School Community

RE: Environmental Testing at South Hill Elementary School

In the last week there has been media coverage of the testing that occurred this past summer at South Hill Elementary School. Such coverage often contains inaccuracies and due to space limitations and editorial decisions may be incomplete. The purpose of this letter is to summarize the events, the outcome, and the District's position on the testing.

In early June, concerns were raised by a number of parents of South Hill students with regard to whether TCE contamination from the manufacturing sites across route 96 had spread to the school property and building. It is known that contamination had spread in the opposite direction, down the hill to a residential area. Although the school is uphill from the manufacturing site, the spread of vapor traveling through the soil tends to seek a path of least resistance rather than always traveling downhill. The District shared the expressed concern of the parents and immediately contacted the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). With no hesitation, DEC agreed that testing should be performed in order to either rule out, or confirm, harmful levels of contamination on the school site. Coordinating with the NYS Department of Health (NYSDOH), the responsible manufacturing parties were contacted with a request to conduct soil vapor testing on the school property. Emerson agreed to arrange for the testing.

The District requested that the testing be performed along the boundary with route 96 as well as between route 96 and the school building, including playground areas. This approach would help to establish whether dangerous levels of vapor had crossed the road and were present in the soil in areas where students congregate and play outside. DEC/DOH reviewed and approved the test plan submitted by Emerson. Samples were collected by Emerson's environmental consultant in mid-July and sent to a NYSDOH approved lab for analysis. In August, the District received the results of the testing. Those results showed low levels of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) including TCE. Concentrations decreased at the sample sites further to the east of the road and closer to the school building. NYSDEC indicated that the levels were very low and not a cause for a health concern.

Although the levels of vapor contained in the outdoor soil samples were low, NYSDEC in consultation with NYSDOH proposed that additional testing be performed at the building site. The District granted permission for the tests. In August, NYSDEC's contractor collected indoor air samples from unoccupied crawl space areas in the building and soil vapor samples from below the concrete slab under classroom, hallway, and basement areas. The district has not yet received a report of the test data and analysis but expects to receive it within the next week. However, it has received a letter from NYSDOH stating:


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“I am pleased to inform you that, based on a review of the data, no further sampling is necessary. As is often the case, low levels of VOCs were detected in all samples collected. Chemicals are part of our everyday life. They are present in the products we store and use indoors and in the outdoor air that enters buildings. As such, some chemicals are expected to be found in air samples. The low levels of VOCs detected in the samples from beneath the school do not indicate levels of contamination requiring further investigation.”

Despite the above statement, several parties are seeking additional testing be done. This testing would involve indoor air testing in ground floor classrooms and hallways. The protocol for such testing is that it be done after the heating season has begun when windows are closed and the heat is in full operation (likely November). Before considering a request for additional testing, the District believes it is prudent to wait until it receives the report and analysis of the August testing, reviews the report and analysis, and discusses its content and any related issues with NYSDEC and NYSDOH representatives. We believe a step by step approach will be the most thorough.

The District is very concerned with both the short and long term health of all of its students and staff. Based on the information received to date from the investigating state agencies, it does not believe any health hazard from TCE contamination exists at the school or on the property. Nevertheless, it will continue to pursue the matter until all questions are answered.

Yours truly,

  
Judith Pastel