

Experts deny Westinghouse is cancer risk

By Paul O'Keefe
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Officials from Westinghouse, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection addressed a special meeting of the Bloomfield Board of Health Tuesday to survey the clean-up of Westinghouse land and to respond to citizen concerns.

Several citizens of the area appeared convinced that the site is the source of local cases of cancer.

But Bowman, director of special projects for Westinghouse's Environmental Affairs Division, reviewed the clean up that has proceeded under state and federal scrutiny for nine years and is near completion.

Bowman said fear of radiation contamination from the Westinghouse land is unfounded, as all radiation surveys have shown only low level readings.

He noted clean-up workers digging up the contaminated areas do not wear protective suits as they would in a high risk project.

Westinghouse has spent more than \$20 million to clean the site since 1986. Buildings No. 7, 8 and 9 were painted with low level radiation from uranium extraction projects done during the 1940s to supply the Manhattan project with fuel for experiments leading to the development of the atomic bomb.

The 14-acre industrial site contains 1 million square feet of building space that Bowman said has been cleaned up inside and out, with the exception of the three uranium processing structures.

Soil remediation continues in some spots, and a groundwater survey that will test for contaminants down to 200 feet will be completed this year.

Bowman reviewed the completed decontamination projects. Asbestos pipe lining was removed from 93,000 feet of piping. Another 23,000 square feet of asbestos floor tile was removed.

Thorium, another radioactive element, was used by Westinghouse as well, but in the same buildings as the uranium processing.

A mercury decontamination sent 1,275 barrels of contaminated concrete and soil out of the site by 1992.

Bowman also said that "hundreds of tons" of soil have been removed from the Westinghouse complex, with clean fill being put in its place.

"We will continue to be open with the community and proceed in the proper manner to clean up this site," Bowman said.

He added that Westinghouse has nothing to hide about the contamination, especially since both state and federal regulators oversee those projects from start to finish and conduct

independent tests to confirm remediation.

Mark Roberts, senior health physicist for the NRC, also addressed the meeting and reviewed his agency's oversight of the Westinghouse decontamination process.

Roberts said that the majority of the site land, west of Arlington Avenue, has been released for unconditional use by NRC.

Radiation levels at the remaining three buildings are low and require no special radiation measuring tags or protective suits for workers.

Roberts noted that most of the site was at "background" radiation readings, levels one would find at any typical spot in New Jersey.

Those areas that are higher, Roberts said, were "a few times higher" than background, or not dangerous enough to require protection.

The contamination found so far is in concrete and piping and does not pose the threat of contamination by casual exposure.

"The radiation exposure level is not much different from this room here," Roberts said, as he added that he regularly walks through the radiation areas with no more protection than a hard hat and work boots.

Some radiation levels have been found in sewer pipes, however, and these will be dug up and disposed.

Citizens of the area seemed unconvinced by the presentation. One woman read a list of unnamed residents who died from various cancers or suffered from Epstein-Barr syndrome, which is not caused by any kind of radiation or even a virus.

The woman blamed the Westinghouse site for the diseases and demanded clean up to residential standards.

An article from a science magazine was cited as evidence that up to 300 pounds of uranium was extracted each day during the war.

Bowman disagreed, saying that Westinghouse contracted to produce three tons of the element in 18 months, which averages to 10 pounds each day at most.

Another citizen noted that several industrial plants are in the area, implying that diseases could possibly come from other sources.

The unknown factor is the Westinghouse clean-up is the extent of groundwater contamination, which should be determined soon when test results are completed.

Recent break-ins by scavengers stealing copper piping raised questions of security. Bowman shared the concern, adding that fences are repaired when cut, patrols are being expanded and barbed wire is being installed to prevent trespassers from being injured in their or stealing attempts.