

## Munitions team scouring Palmyra site for explosives

By **TODD MCHALE**

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PALMYRA — The search is on.

Munitions experts armed with powerful metal detection equipment have begun to comb the grounds of the former Palmyra Drive-in and current home of the Tacony-Palmy-ra Flea Market in search of unexploded artillery from the World War II era.

“So far we haven't found anything but we're in the early stages of the investigation,” John Hogue, environmental engineer and consultant for the borough, said Friday.

The possibility of the munitions being buried on the grounds of the old drive-in came to light last fall after borough officials confirmed that the state Department of Environmental Protection had discovered it had been used for a top-secret U.S. Army testing program of recoilless rifle systems in the 1940s.

“They used it for a firing range to test anti-tank artillery that was being developed at the Franklin Arsenal across the river,” Hogue said. “They weren't bombs. It was artillery that was designed to detonate on impact.”

He said the shells, fired at targets set up in the area, ranged in size from 55 mm to 105 mm, meaning they could be as big as 4 inches in diameter and more than a foot and a half long.

After the Army concluded its testing program, the area was paved by the owners of the drive-in in the early 1950s, essentially capping any shells left behind in place.

The problem now is that the site is within the borough's 189-acre redevelopment zone, where a major residential and commercial project has been proposed.

“Now that we're going to be moving dirt around out there we want to make sure that there aren't any of these unexploded shells still buried there,” Hogue said.

Earlier in the week, Hogue said members of Munitions Management Group of Knoxville, Tenn., surveyed the area and created a “test cell.”

The test cell is basically an area where inert shells are buried to ensure the detection equipment is able to spot anomalies at least 4 feet below the surface.

With the equipment calibrated to the right levels, Hogue said the workers were able to start looking for any unspent shells.

The investigation and cleanup is being funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund Municipal Program.

Hogue said the work, which will be done during the week, could take several months to complete. During that time, the Tacony-Palmy-ra Flea Market will be able to continue to operate on the weekends.

"It's safe to say that we won't be putting the flea market out of business in 2008," Mayor John Gural said.

So how safe is it to venture out to the flea market on the weekend?

"It's as safe as it's been in the last 60 years," Hogue said. "We haven't done anything that has increased the chances of one of these things going off."

He said if they do find any unexploded munitions, workers will cordon off the area and detonate the shell on site.

"We will notify all the local authorities before we detonate," Hogue said.

**E-mail: [tmchale@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:tmchale@phillyBurbs.com)**