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2nd report finds lead at Ithaca site

By Jennie Daley
Journal Staff

ITHACA — Another set of soil tests from near the former Ithaca Gun factory site show levels of lead contamination that can pose a health risk to humans.

The tests were made by a Cornell University student earlier this spring. The student's tests follow similar findings of high levels of lead, arsenic, cadmium and chromium in soils tests made two weeks ago in that area by The Ithaca Journal and Toxics Targeting of Ithaca.

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Myles Gray, who graduated in May, found lead levels as high as 31,424 parts per million just outside the abandoned factory. The building is located on Lake Street near the Ithaca Falls gorge. Another site at the edge of the factory found lead levels of 1,312 ppm. In its 2002-2004 cleanup of the industrial site, the U.S. Environmental Protection


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Agency spent \$4.8 million to reduce lead concentration to less than 400 ppm.

Gray was not available for comment on his findings. However, Gray's project advisor, Louis Derry, who is director of Cornell's biogeochemistry program, said that generally Gray's project showed that areas that had been cleaned up were still clean, but

significant contamination remained.

"I don't think you want that lead lying around out there because eventually it's going to end up someplace else," he said.

Tests done for The Ithaca Journal and Toxics Targeting last week found contamination from the northern part of the factory property moving onto cleaned city land. One soil sample re-tested this week showed lead levels at 184,000 ppm, 460 times higher than the EPA's clean-up goal for lead at the site. Arsenic levels were almost 300 times higher than state soil clean up objectives. Levels of cadmium and chromium also exceeded the standard.

City action

Ithaca City officials met Friday to discuss the contamination reports, which Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson described as "a disturbing surprise."

On Thursday Ithaca Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-125th Dist., called upon the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the federal EPA to immediately secure the site that contains potential pollution and finish the cleanup without delay.

"Lead is a potent poison that can cause serious illness. It is one of the greatest, if not the greatest environmental threat to our children. To claim that a site has been remediated to a maximum of 400 ppm, when, in fact, levels have been found to be 400 times that level, is totally intolerable and a serious



SIMON WHEELER / Journal Staff

A shotgun shell and slag sit exposed below the former Ithaca Gun factory.

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violation of public trust," Lifton said.

No action has yet been taken to secure the site or post warnings of the potential hazards to humans. Peterson said Friday she is reviewing that possibility. The property abuts Ithaca Falls, a popular attraction for hikers and picnickers.

At Friday's meeting city officials reviewed plans for a state grant application that could apply to the former Ithaca Gun factory. The Restore New York grant provides up to \$5 million to a community for building repairs, demolition, environmental clean up and reconstruction.

Peterson said the city requested \$1.7 million for renovations at the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, 318 N. Albany St., and \$2.98 million for the demolition, environmental clean up and reconstruction of the former Ithaca Gun factory building. She said the city had completed hours of work on the GIAC building where a chunk of concrete fell from the roof on May 8 crushing a steel handrail. No one was injured in the incident.

Peterson said the Restore New York grant requires the city to set a priority. The city put GIAC as its top priority for a grant. The problems related to the Ithaca Gun building were not known until an Aug. 22 fire at the factory re-kindled concerns about derelict site. Peterson said news of toxic materials on the property outside the building added to her concern about the site.

No one was injured in the fire that was quickly extinguished. State and city officials later said lead and asbestos in the building are hazards. In addition the building's floors are structurally unsafe. The fire started in a pile of discarded mattresses leading to speculation that the unsecured building attracts vandals and curious visitors.

"I really want both to get funded," she said Friday night, after the application was driven to Albany to make a 5 p.m. filing deadline.

For the community center, grant funds would go toward restorations in the building's interior. The money would allow programs to move from the basement to the second floor, supply new windows and cover the cost of other cosmetic work, according to Marcia Fort, the center's executive director.

This money would be in addition to the \$200,000 allocated by Common Council earlier this year after a large piece of concrete fell off the exterior of the building. Approximately \$30,000 of that was used for emergency repairs immediately after the incident in May.

For Ithaca Gun, the work would be significantly more extensive and lead to the leveling of what remains of a company that operated on the site for 124 years.

Announcements of the grant awards are planned for mid-October, which should give Ithaca Gun property owner Wally Diehl and his partners at O'Brien & Gere enough time to stay on track to meet a city-mandated demolition within six months.

Phyllis Radke, the city's building commissioner, issued an order for demolition within six months after a fire at the plant in late August brought concerns about the vacant building back to the fore.

Diehl's lawyer was out of the office Friday and unable to comment. O'Brien & Gere did not return calls for comment.

Radke said if Diehl fails to comply by the order's deadline, there will be daily fines of \$500.

"We find when we start to apply that kind of pressure they start being able to come up with better and better ideas of how to deal with the issues," Radke said. "That building is a menace to society."

Even if Ithaca Gun is accepted into the Restore New York program, it's unclear how much of the contamination outside the building would be addressed. On the Empire State Development Corporation's Web site, it states that "the only eligible costs are those directly associated with the building, not the site."

The dangers of lead

Lead contamination in and around the Ithaca Gun site is a concern because of its known neurological impacts. These impacts are most pronounced in young children, particularly those up to 5 years old.

Absorption of lead into the blood stream can lead to learning disabilities, decreased growth, hyperactivity and impaired hearing, according to the EPA.

"Young children have a lot of hand-to-mouth activity and their brains are growing much faster, proportionately, so they're much more susceptible," said John Andersson, director of environmental health for the Tompkins County Health Department.

Recent research shows that children are so susceptible that some scientists are calling for the lowering of standards used by the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization as a threshold for adverse health effects from lead. The EPA uses this number to establish lead cleanup levels.

Under current practices, the EPA applies what is known as the Integrated Exposure Uptake Biokinetic Model, or IEUBK, to translate environmental lead concentrations into likely blood lead levels in children. In the model, decisions are made based on the premise that cleanup levels will ensure a blood lead level in children no higher than 10 micrograms per deciliter.

At the cleanup next to Ithaca Falls, using the IEUBK model, the EPA came up with a cleanup goal of 400 parts per million for lead.

Richard Canfield, a senior research associate in Cornell's division of nutritional sciences, completed a study published in the April 17, 2003, edition of the New England Journal of Medicine showing that even the CDC's 10 micrograms per deciliter level may be too high to prevent brain damage in children.

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Bruce Estes of The Ithaca Journal staff contributed to this report.

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