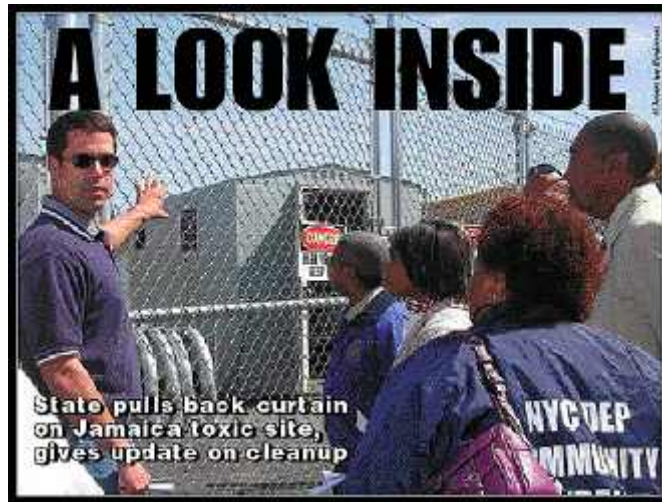


Toxic Site Cleanup Under Way In Jamaica

by Christopher Henderson , ChrisH@qchron.com



Project Manager Drew Small takes residents on a tour of the West Side Corp. property last week. The Jamaica site is in the early stages of a 20 year cleanup to remove toxic chemical from the soil and groundwater.

For the past four months the ground beneath the polluted former home of the West Side Corp. in Jamaica has been boiling.

The state's Department of Environmental Conservation has been heating the soil up to 700 degrees fahrenheit to extract the large quantities of a dry cleaning chemical spilled at the site two decades ago. The cleanup project, which will continue in several phases over the next 15 to 20 years, has thus far pulled about 4,000 pounds of contaminants from the ground, according to John Sunquist, one of the consultants on the project from the engineering firm URS.

The electrical resistance heating system, operated by the environmental services

company Clayton Group, heats the soil by pumping 815 kilowatts of electricity—enough to power a small city—into the ground under the site, at 107 10 180th St.

Once the soil reaches the boiling point, the contaminants and water within it turn into vapor. The vapor is extracted from the ground through the tubes and treated. The toxins are separated from the rest of the vapor and destroyed by a machine that runs similar to an automobile's catalytic converter. The decontaminated remaining vapor is then pumped into the atmosphere.

The primary chemical on the West Side site—now a bus depot owned by Atlantic Express—is tetrachloroethene or PCE, a carcinogen. It leaked into the soil and the groundwater over the course of several years. West Side Corp., which distributed dry cleaning chemicals to businesses across the city, left the site more than 20 years ago. In 1997, the state added it to its Registry of Inactive Hazardous Sites.

Now it may be another 20 years before the toxic legacy is completely cleaned. The electrical resistance heating system, which began operating in December, is the initial stage of a long term process to clean up the site.

"We're going to shut it down next week and take samples of the soil to compare with previous numbers," Sunquist said.

Once the department determines that the levels of PCE in the soil no longer require such an intensive process, it will shift to a similar extraction system that pulls out vapors without heating the soil.

The last phase of the project will involve turning on a well near the site to pump groundwater out of the underground Brooklyn Queens Aquifer for treatment.

The groundwater underneath the site and the residential area to the south and west has slowly been contaminated as the chemicals have seeped through the soil over the past two decades. The well will reverse the flow of the groundwater back towards the site. Once the water is out of the ground it will be treated and pumped into Jamaica Bay.

The well project will be put out for bid within the next six months, with construction to begin by the end of the year.

David Chiusano, the DEC's project manager for the West Side cleanup, said it will take up to 20 years to get all the pollution out of the ground. "We need to get (the soil vapor extraction) done before we could start on that phase," he said.

The DEC has been testing the air and soil quality in much of the residential neighborhood south and west of the site. The department sent letters to about 250 homeowners in the area bounded on the north by 106th Road, the east by 180th Street, the south by Sayres Avenue and the west by 174th Street. About 50 houses were tested, according to the DEC.

Some residents have expressed concern about the lasting health effects of the pollution in the soil and the groundwater. In interviews conducted last month, several residents on 107th Avenue, who live directly behind the West Side site, said they did not know about the contamination on the property or the testing in the neighborhood.

Other residents have been pleased with the cleanup by the DEC. At the tour last Friday, Jefferson Diggs, a neighbor of the facility and a representative of City Councilman Leroy Comrie, said the agency had done a good job.

“This whole project has gone pretty much as planned without any major foul ups. As a community member, I am very pleased with how things have gone,” he said.