

Cleanup plan for Commercial Property Debated

EPD: GE's original proposal flawed

West of Redmond Circle, in the drainage path of the GE site lie 24 acres of highly contaminated commercial property. PCB soil levels at the site have been recorded as high as 95,000 parts per million (ppm)—the highest published level ever in Rome. PCB



Gates block entry to the former Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse site on Redmond Circle.

levels in groundwater beneath the land have registered as high as 97 parts per billion (ppb). The state's maximum allowable contaminant level for groundwater is .5 ppb.

The land, once occupied by a Lowe's Home Improvement store and still partially occupied by Dr. Richard Muller's dental practice, is the latest hot spot in the Rome PCB cleanup that is expected to last for decades.

In letters sent to GE late last year, Georgia Environmental Protection Division and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials called GE's cleanup plan for the property flawed.

The plan GE submitted last fall calls for leaving highly contaminated soils in place, covering the property with an impermeable cap and installing a groundwater pump and treat system to prevent contaminated groundwater from leaving the site.

GE's choice of containment over removal would require the company's presence in perpetuity, removing the property from future development.

In written comments, EPD stated: "Reliance upon a pump and treat system to try to contain the high levels of contamination in a karst environment present too great a risk to accept for virtual perpetuity...Any hydraulic control remedy should include removal of highly contaminated source areas."

EPD also objected to GE's plan to cap the property: "Surface

covers may abate downward migration of water, however...there would be a horizontal component of groundwater flow which could carry contaminants down to the wetlands and farther."

In a Dec. 12, 2002 letter to EPD, EPA concurred with the state's concerns about a groundwater pump and treat system in a karst geologic setting and suggested that GE remove contaminated soils: "Permanent reductions in toxicity, mobility or volume are preferred to exposure control because it is protective of human health and the environment in the long-term and removes the risks associated with the potential failure of engineering and institutional controls."

On Jan 15, GE's Richard Lester responded in a letter to EPD saying that their original proposal for the property "was not intended to be the definitive sole option for addressing the Rome site, and GE remains willing to consider any reasonable alternatives."

Nevertheless, Lester reiterated GE's contention that the karst geology beneath the site was not unique and said GE would continue its preliminary designs for the pump and treat system.

Asked about the possibilities of reuse of the property after cleanup, EPD hazardous waste program manager Jim Ussery, said, "We're trying to get a full range of uses, but if GE leaves large amounts of PCBs on the property then the use will be limited. They own the property there so they are probably not concerned about redevelopment, but certainly the community is."

GE currently owns all but three acres of the property targeted for cleanup.

Those three acres belong to Muller who has filed suit against GE in state court.

Migration of PCBs from the GE site on to adjacent property and beyond has been well documented.

State environmental officials speculate that continued run off from contaminated properties and even transfer of contaminated groundwater to surface water is a continuing source of low levels of contamination in area streams and rivers.

GE tactics prompt feds involvement

Community to get more say in cleanup

Until last summer, the haggling over how to clean up contaminated properties in Rome was between well-heeled, litigation-ready GE and Georgia's under-funded, litigation-wary Environmental Protection Division (EPD). As one observer noted, the process was like watching a convicted criminal tell a judge what punishment he would accept.

Frustrated by GE's lack of cooperation, EPD director Harold Reheis wrote the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on July 23, 2002 requesting that the agency take over the project under its Superfund program.

GE strongly opposed the move to place the cleanup under the fed's more powerful scrutiny. Likewise local leaders are concerned about the stigma attached with Superfund sites. Rather than take over the cleanup, EPA agreed to work with EPD and GE for a "comprehensive cleanup within" the state's regulatory authority.

EPA involvement seems to have GE's attention. "They're indicating they are moving closer to what we want," said Jim Ussery of EPD's hazardous waste management branch.

Key to federal intervention is the use of federal guidance standards for toxic cleanups. These standards require that GE present a full range of options for each cleanup action to regulators and the community.

After public input and review by EPD and EPA, the best alternative is chosen based a list of nine factors including "community acceptance."

Thus far, in the clean up action for Landfill A, the proposed action for commercial property and the investigation of contaminated residential properties, GE has offered only one option.

In a Dec. 12, 2002 letter to EPD outlining the guidance standards, EPA senior policy advisor Richard Green said, "GE should be required to evaluate a range of alternatives from complete cleanup to total containment and several that are in between these two extremes... Obviously, if only one remedy is considered and selected, the community has no chance to comment on other possible remedies that might have been better from their perspective."

In a Dec. 17, 2002 letter to GE, Reheis asked the company to present a full range of options for the cleanup of contaminated commercial property.

On Jan. 15 GE's Richard Lester replied in a letter to EPD: "GE has no disagreement with this and is willing to evaluate all reasonable alternatives."

Whether or not GE follows federal guidelines and allows the community to participate in decisions regarding cleanups remains to be seen.

Said Ussery: "GE has made it clear that they don't want to go under federal authority, and we've made it clear to GE that in order for them to keep working with us, we're going to do things that are consistent with what EPA would want to do."

Added EPA's Green, "It doesn't need to (be a Superfund site) if GE does what is suppose to be done."

