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News and information for Friday, July 06, 2007

PCB cleanup is costly: State to pay \$2 million for UMass work

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AMHERST - The cost of repairs to a signature University of Massachusetts building will jump by nearly 50 percent, due to an environmental problem.

Last summer, routine tests that accompanied a \$4.2 million waterproofing project at the Lederle Graduate Research Center found a hazardous chemical contaminant.

Now, with approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in hand, UMass will spend another \$2 million to clean up PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), discovered in the caulking surrounding the concrete slabs encasing Tower A of the Lederle complex.

Since the PCBs were found, UMass has been working with the EPA to hammer out an appropriate cleanup plan for the building.

In late June, the EPA approved a \$2 million cleanup project that will decontaminate the building's outdoor caulking, replace contaminated carpeting in the building's library and remove PCBs that have seeped into the asphalt and soil below the tower.

The entire abatement project is expected to wrap up in the spring of 2008.

The project's multimillion-dollar price tag is being covered by the state's capital and immediate response funds, said James E. Cahill, director of facilities and campus planning at UMass.

'We were able to tap into some of that to cover the PCB problem. Pretty much, this is all state funded,' Cahill said.

PCBs are known to cause skin rashes in adults and neurobehavioral and immunological changes in children. PCBs are also a

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suspected cancer-causing agent.

In 1971, when the Lederle building was constructed, PCBs were allowed.

In the 1950s through 1970s, caulking laden with PCBs was seen as a superb, but expensive, new insulator guaranteed to last over 30 years.

People were unaware that PCBs would turn out to be harmful to people's health. The chemical was used on many masonry buildings. But in 1977, they were banned for use in the United States under the Toxic Substances Control Act.

The Lederle buildings were erected during a construction boom on the Amherst campus. A number of other structures were built during the 1970s when PCB caulking was king. Cahill said he is hopeful that UMass won't find other buildings covered in PCB caulk when the time comes to renovate or improve them.

'We have talked internally about this,' Cahill said. 'All we can do is seek advice from environmental health and safety people in that regard and hope for the best.'

Due to the contamination, work on the Lederle project to reseal and waterproof the 35-year-old building was stopped in July 2006. The work crew, Chapman Waterproofing Co. of Boston, postponed work on Tower A and continued sealing the complex's other buildings. Chapman will also take care of the abatement work.

U.S. agencies do not agree upon a standard for a safe level of PCBs in the workplace. The EPA and National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health recommend a standard of 1 microgram per cubic meter.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration recommends 500 micrograms per cubic meter as a safe level for the workplace.

PCBs were found at 133,000 to 723,000 parts per million (ppm) in the sealant on the Lederle building, and in the soil around the building at 1 to 42 ppm, Tor said. Earlier tests resulted in lower PCB counts.

The engineering firm hired by the university to test the library, Environmental Health and Engineering of Newton, found PCBs at the levels of 1.2 and 1.08 micrograms per cubic meter.

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