

Questions arise over PCB removal plans

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by Laura A. Shepard, Chronicle Contributor |

Despite the controversy about potentially cancer-causing PCB contamination at hundreds of public schools, attendance was scant at a hearing last Thursday in Queens on the city's plan to remove the material from hundreds of city schools by the end of 2016.

Meetings were held in every borough over the past week and a half to discuss the issue. While attendance was lacking in Queens and the Bronx, meetings in Staten Island and Brooklyn were slated for this week.

Last Thursday's meeting was hosted by the Environmental Protection Agency and held at Queens Gateway to Health Sciences Secondary School in Jamaica Hills. Fewer than a dozen people attended.

Christina Giorgio, an attorney at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, attributes the low turnout at the hearing to lack of publicity and failure by organizers to contact the borough's community education councils.

But she said that parents from all over the city turned out at the June 3 meeting at Stuyvesant High School and "gave the city an earful.

"When parents get informed, they get it," Giorgio said. "Their voices in this landscape are critical because the EPA has not made its determination yet on whether to accept or reject the city's proposal."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are synthetic chemicals that were manufactured in the United States from about the 1930s to the late 1970s. They were used in the construction of hundreds of city schools between 1950 and 1979.

"They were considered like a magic chemical because they had valuable properties," said James Haklar, a representative from the EPA. "They had these good properties, but they were also dangerous and potentially cancer-causing."

Chronic exposure to PCBs has been linked to lot of problems in animals, including effects on the immune system, the nervous system, cognitive functions, liver, kidney, toxicity and depression. However, the effects on humans are harder to assess, according to Mark Maddaloni, the EPA risk assessor and toxicologist for the region.

He noted that exceeding the EPA's safety guidelines of 300 nanograms per cubic meter does not necessarily cause any harmful effects, but said that it is important to stay below guidelines to maintain the cushion of safety.

PCBs were banned by the Toxic Substances Control Act in 1978. However, 1.4 billion pounds were produced prior to that, and used in electrical components and building materials, particularly caulk around windows and in between masonry.

About seven years ago, some individuals started collecting samples from school buildings and sending them to labs for testing. When the results came back, they alerted the EPA to the problem.

The federal department discussed the issue with the city and agreed to a consent order in Jan. 2010, under which the city is investigating the severity of the problem. The city conducted a pilot study, where it analyzed one school in each borough that was constructed between 1950 and 1979 with PCBs to determine the best approach to solving the problem around the city.

Gary Hunt, the principal scientist and vice president of TRC Corp., the consulting firm the School Construction Authority hired to conduct the pilot study on removing PCBs, said the study is “the first and only study in the U.S. of this scope and magnitude,” and called it a “groundbreaking program,” since the problem has not been looked at in other urban areas around the world with the same issues.

Removing PCBs is unlike dealing with asbestos or lead, according to Hunt, because the chemistry is complex — there are over 209 chemical compounds — and it is hard to assess their primary sources and completely remove them.

The city replaced the windows at PS 183 in the Rockaways as part of the pilot study, to see if removing the PCB-contaminated caulk would lower the levels of PCBs in the air, dust and soil around the school. Other methods were tested in the other schools, such as encapsulation, or putting a coating on the caulk to trap the PCBs inside.

“A lot of good scientific work was done under the pilot study,” Haklar said. “We have a better idea of where PCBs can be found in a school, and by removing the PCB-contaminated light fixtures, the city is removing a significant source of PCBs.”

However, light fixtures were found to be a significant source of PCBs in the air, as many that were installed around the 1960s have smoked or leaked PCBs into the air, most notably at IS 204 in Long Island City in September 2012, in an incident that helped bring the problem into the public eye. These fixtures were removed from all five pilot schools and the city is in the process of removing them from all 438 schools that have them.

The city incurred the costs of the study and spent millions of dollars over the past few years, especially on lab analyses, according to Ross Holden from the School Construction Authority. He said removing all the light fixtures is going to be “about a billion dollars give or take.”

However, Giorgio said that she reviewed the data, and while removing the lights was effective, the link was not as direct as the EPA claimed because PCB levels did not decrease everywhere.

A peer review of the city’s pilot study, which called it “comprehensive and appropriate, also advised that proactively addressing the PCB issue would be preferable to dealing with the issue over the normal course of school construction.

Ventilation is a key component to lowering indoor air concentrations and the reviewers recommended optimal ventilation. However, many older schools have systems that only operate with the windows open and some newer ones don’t have windows that open.





Giorgio expressed some frustration with the study because testing with the windows open allows outside air to dilute the PCB levels, compromising the study’s scientific validity, and doesn’t provide an accurate representation of real classroom conditions. Windows are often closed due to construction and other noise sources, as well as poor air quality and temperature.

“For all the work they’ve done, we don’t even know the extent of the health risk to these children,” she said.




The peer reviewers also said that actively removing PCBs from soil would not significantly reduce exposure because inhaling PCBs from the air was far more common.

The public can submit comments by mail to James Haklar, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2890 Woodbridge Ave., Building 10, Edison, NJ 08837 or at PCBsPreferredRemedy.Region2@epa.gov.




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