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Eight months after first attempting to organize a Citizens Advisory Group for the 32-acre asbestos site impacting Ambler Borough, Whitpain and Upper Dublin townships, residents may finally get to voice their concerns before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency completes its investigation. The manner of testing at the site is one of those concerns.

Thirteen residents formed a CAG in January but the EPA refused to recognize the group's legitimacy, noting a neutral facilitator was required, according to Ambler resident Sharon McCormick. EPA sponsored an informational meeting on the CAG's role in June.

"We have a million questions and have been somewhat limited to answers via an e-mail journal, which has only been published for public viewing twice," McCormick wrote in an e-mail to Melinda J. Holland, senior mediator/facilitator for Holland and Associates in Columbus, N.C.

Holland, who has served as third party facilitator for EPA in the past, was endorsed by original CAG members and is funded by the EPA. She released a report last week with recommendations on the formation, operating procedures and ground rules for a new CAG.

The report also summarizes concerns and goals of site "stakeholders" as told to Holland in about 70 interviews conducted to establish CAG members.

Holland recommended politics and campaigning be kept "off the table" during meetings, referencing a "history of mistrust" that began with the high-rise construction proposal for the 6-acre portion of the Bo-Rit site.

The CAG should comprise 15 to 25 members, she said. Holland recommended - and EPA and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection endorsed - core members, representing diverse interests of the community based on her findings.

McCormick was named a member along with representatives of West Ambler Civic Association, Whitpain Residents Organization, Whitmarsh Township Residents Association, Mercer Hill Village Association and the American Legion Post of West Ambler.

Representatives for Clean Water Action, Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association and Ambler Environmental Advisory Council; state and federal regulatory agencies; health agencies; site owners; local business owners and government representatives were also on the list.

A few times throughout the report Holland mentioned the CAG should attempt to secure a technical assistance grant for professional help interpreting data and/or running independent testing.

McCormick said she felt the report revealed environmental organizations are "having the same problems trying to understand what's going on as we are."

The section of the report that summarized concerns of environmental and conservation

groups questioned the safety of Wissahickon Creek water and a possible "no-action alternative" if the EPA ends testing at the site.

Local government concerns also echoed residents' fears - who will pay to clean up the site if EPA will not? A "lack of confidence" in PADEP based on a history of inadequate enforcement of violations at the site was also highlighted.

Testing at the site

Earlier this month Eduardo Rovira, on-scene coordinator for EPA Mid-Atlantic Region, said EPA has not found asbestos levels in the community that pose an unacceptable or significant health risk.

Testing was scheduled through September but may not end then because EPA must "work around the weather," Rovira said.

Since then the EPA collected the most recent samples on Aug. 13 after a night of heavy rainfall, marking what Lynn Hoffmann of Whitpain believes is the fifth out of six tests taken under wet soil conditions since air sampling and analysis began in April 2006.

McCormick said although citizens are "lucky" the pile has been moist, keeping it "somewhat contained," that does not mean it is safe.

Hoffmann, who was also named a CAG member, has been tracking weather conditions as the EPA conducts testing. Weather reports posted on the official Web site, www.epaosc.net/BoRit, do not indicate soil conditions or precipitation before, during or after the tests, she said.

On Aug. 21, Lora Siegmann Werner, senior regional representative for the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry said she understands residents "want to make sure the sampling effort encompasses worst case situations."

"Air monitoring can be tricky," she continued. "Certainly the more sampling rounds you have the better the chance that you will cover a range of seasonal differences."

Werner called the EPA's 8-plus test rounds a "comprehensive dataset" expected to "adequately" represent the "range of conditions at the site" when ATSDR evaluates for public health purposes.

According to Rovira, "EPA is using the best analytical techniques available to sample and analyze for asbestos."

Dates are being worked out for the first public CAG meeting, which will likely be held in September or October.