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Officials say new school plans still on schedule

■ Environmental cleanup of Hartford neighborhood site won't delay school opening, says city.

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Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- Even as environmental consultants continued testing ground water and gas vapors at the proposed new school site and the City Council sent the construction plan back to its Finance Committee late last week, city officials maintain the project will not be delayed.

The elementary school is still expected to be ready for opening day Sept. 1, with the middle school to be completed shortly thereafter.

And even though a first round of testing found elevated levels of lead and arsenic and small amounts of gasoline and oil at the site off Hartford Avenue and Springfield Street, the same officials are confident that the site can be easily cleaned up and made environmentally safe.

"So far, it's nothing major," said Councilman John J. Igliazzi, who represents the ward in which the new school complex would be built. "This site is no different than any other site . . . there's nothing there so hazardous or so toxic that the schools can't be built or that the problems can't be addressed or abated."

While Igliazzi admitted that he has not seen the results of the first round of testing, he said he has been out at the site, which is near his own home, and seen only glass bottles, metal cans and clothing.

"What is there is not going to present any harmful affects to people who are going to work there or go to school there," Igliazzi said. "Just as it hasn't affected anybody who's been living there for 50 years."

What sets the 10-acre site apart from some other areas of the city is that from at least 1965 to 1970, a portion of the parcel was used as a city dump for bottles and cans and garbage. Neighbors say others also dumped refuse at the site illegally.

Several neighbors who called The Providence Journal said they were concerned about possible contamination, after the city announced plans to build two schools at the site last month.

City officials assured residents that environmental soil testing would be conducted to make sure the land was free of hazards. The test results conducted by the private firm, ATC Group Service Inc., were

logged in a report to the city this month.

But Alan R. Sepe, acting director of public properties, has declined to make public the results from the first batch of test; Sepe said Friday that because more testing is being done, the report is not "100 percent complete."

Sepe said the city ordered testing to be done on the ground water and gasoline there and is "doing every test that we possibly can," in order to thoroughly evaluate the site. He said the good news is that the first round of tests did not show such harmful contaminants as benzene, trichloride and other toxic cleaning solutions.

He maintains that "just because you detect (low levels of some materials) doesn't mean that the site is not fine" to build on.

Sepe said he is drafting a plan to clean up the site and will submit it to the state Department of Environmental Management, the agency that must approve the proposed means of cleanup. Sepe said remediation could include removing problem areas from the site or covering the areas.

After receiving DEM approval, Sepe said he will present all the test results and the remediation plan to the public at a School Board meeting; after tonight, the next board meeting is April 5.

The issue of contamination resurfaced at last Thursday's City Council meeting when council member and finance committee chairman Kevin Jackson, told council members that -- based on what Sepe told him -- parts of the land have been found to have lead, arsenic, gasoline and oil.

At the meeting, Jackson described the degree of contamination as being no worse than what could be found on any given property in an industrial city such as Providence. On Friday, he reiterated that "any site that (the city) picks could have some problem with it."

Still, he and 13 other council members voted to put a hold on the request to spend \$39.7 million to finance the school construction project and make other school renovations until after the remediation, or cleanup plan, has been drafted.

The proposal was sent back to the Finance Committee, which has its next meeting scheduled for Thursday.

Igliozi -- who was the only council member to vote against holding the proposal -- said he was speaking for his constituents when he lobbied to have the proposal approved. Igliozi has spent recent weeks addressing the concerns of the neighborhood and called a meeting last week at which about 100 residents heard about plans for the site and had many of their questions addressed.

Still, Jackson said, council members "wanted to see in writing what's going to happen" with the cleanup.

"We just want to make sure that we cross our t's and dot our i's," Jackson said. "We don't want this to come back and bite us in the

future."

City and school officials need council approval to borrow money to build the schools and make other renovations. The plan calls for a 450-pupil elementary school and an 800-pupil middle school to be constructed on the 10-acre parcel; the entire elementary school and more than half of the middle school are expected to be completed by the Sept. 1 start of school.

Sepe said he has planned all along for construction to begin by April 8.

But several hurdles have to be cleared before construction can begin.

Thomas E. Deller, deputy director of planning and development, has said letters would be sent last week or this week to land owners who still own some of the 121 lots that make up the 10-acre parcel. City officials will try to negotiate a price or take the land by eminent domain, Deller has said.

First the new test results must be returned and Sepe must submit his clean-up plan. Then, the cleanup plan has to be approved by DEM and the project as a whole needs approval from the finance committee, the City Council and School Board.

Sepe said time and funding for environmental cleanup is built into the construction plan. Therefore, he said, he is confident that the construction plans will not be delayed.

School officials expressed similar confidence that the city will move forward with plans to build.

Interim School Supt. Robert A. DeRobbio has said the new classrooms are needed to address the annual 3 percent enrollment increase that the school district has experienced over the last decade.

Hundreds of new students are expected to enroll in the system next fall -- many of them residents of the Hartford Park and Silver Lake neighborhoods.

DeRobbio denied that a controversial contract proposal -- introduced last week -- to temporarily increase class size was the school system's hedge against the Hartford schools not being finished on time.

He said the increased class-size idea was an effort to reduce transportation costs.

DeRobbio said this isn't the first time the school district faced the possibility of not having schools completed by September. He said there is still time to arrange for alternatives, like using modular classrooms and leasing temporary building space.

Or, as a last resort, if the Hartford site were not ready, the city could build on a Gordon Avenue site, where an abandoned factory burned

down in 1996, said Mark V. Dunham, senior administrator for operations and finance. City officials are currently working to ready that site for construction next year of an elementary school to replace the Robert Bailey Elementary School, which is now housed in a leased building in Fox Point.

But, DeRobbio said, he believes the schools will be ready in time.

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