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Council agrees to school bonds

■ Reassured that contamination of the Hartford Avenue site will be remedied, the City Council votes to borrow \$39.9 million for the two new schools and other purposes.

By GREGORY SMITH
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- With state and local officials moving to take care of chemical contamination at the Hartford schools site, a reassured City Council last night approved the borrowing of money to build the schools.

The city wants to build a middle school and an elementary school at Hartford Avenue and Springfield Street in the Hartford neighborhood and have them open in time for the next school year.

But the subsurface of the soil at the 10-acre site, part of which once served as a city dump, is contaminated by petroleum, arsenic and lead. Arsenic and the components of petroleum products, such as benzene, are potential causes of cancer in human beings. And lead poses other health threats, such as brain impairment in children.

The extent of the contamination is "moderate, but still of concern," said Gregory Fine, supervising engineer in the Office of Waste Management of the state Department of Environmental Management. The three contaminants exceed the limits that DEM allows for a school project without remedial action, Fine said Monday.

The potential health threat would come from the swallowing, inhalation or touching of the contaminants over time, so encapsulating the contaminants on-site, as the city proposes to do, would be a feasible solution, Fine said. Even if the contaminated soil is not at the surface now, the DEM must step in because the contamination might be brought to the surface during construction or in future years, he said.

"The contamination is relatively homogeneous throughout (the site); there is not one glaring hot spot," he said.

Nevertheless, Fine did not rule out the possibility that the DEM would require the removal of some soil.

With proper precautions, a school "may be a very beneficial reuse of that property," Fine said.

The city proposes to put a liner or some sort of barrier over the contaminated soil and then cover it with at least 2 feet of fill or with

paving or the building foundations. It also plans to install a gas collection system to safely vent health-threatening vaporous elements and methane, should they develop at excessive levels from decomposing garbage or other sources.

Councilman John J. Iglizzi has held neighborhood meetings to discuss the projects, but Fine said the DEM would insist on holding a public meeting and allowing a period for public comment on the city's proposed remediation plan before the department approves a plan.

Fine noted that the DEM has not been invited to any public forum. "Doing this in (an information) vacuum is not right," he said.

Some council members have been reluctant to endorse borrowing for the school project until complete details of the contamination are disclosed and the remediation plan is approved. The council on March 18 delayed action on the borrowing until it could get more information.

Since then the Cianci administration made public a summary environmental report. Given the urgent need for the schools -- an enrollment bulge is anticipated this fall -- council members are convinced that the borrowing must be approved so the project can proceed.

The council approved a \$39.9 million bond issue to build the two schools as well as for other purposes.

Also given second and final passage last night were two ordinances that would empower the Providence Redevelopment Agency to condemn land for the Hartford schools, as well as a new Robert Bailey Elementary School in South Providence. The Bailey School presently occupies a rented building in Fox Point.

In other action, the council:

- Passed a resolution opposing Governor Almond's bill in the Senate to do away with municipal residency laws in Providence and elsewhere. The council strongly supports the local law requiring municipal employees to be city residents.

City Solicitor Charles R. Mansolillo said after the council meeting that the way the bill is worded, it won't affect Providence because the city has special status: It has a home rule charter.

- Passed a resolution calling on the governor, Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. and state legislators to notify the council before any meeting is held or any deliberation occurs on legislation affecting Providence residents.

The council was embarrassed and annoyed when the Senate Corporations Committee recently held a hearing on the Almond residency bill that the council did not know about; the committee voted to approve the bill and send it to the full Senate for consideration.

Before passing the resolution, council members skirmished over its practicality and whether senators and representatives from Providence would take it to be a slight on their work.

Councilwoman Josephine DiRuzzo inquired whether it was true that the majority leader and the council president told the city's chief lobbyist, Deputy City Solicitor Patricia McLaughlin, that she was not to represent the council at the General Assembly. DiRuzzo said that is what McLaughlin told her.

Majority Leader Ronald W. Allen and President John J. Lombardi adamantly denied that they told McLaughlin or state legislators that McLaughlin does not represent the council.

In an unusual move, Lombardi yielded the gavel to the president pro tem in order to address that and a couple of other points. Under council rules, the president may not engage in debate with other members from the podium.

DiRuzzo's question touched a sore point because some council members disagree with positions taken by the Cianci administration at the State House.

- Rejected the mayor's nomination of James H. Leach, of 500 Blackstone Blvd., who is in the real estate business, for another term on the city Plan Commission. The council Finance Committee had scheduled an interview for Leach last Thursday. Although Leach was notified, he did not appear, according to Allen.

Under the Providence Home Rule Charter, the council only has 15 days in which to affirm or reject a mayoral nomination, or the appointment automatically takes effect. At least three appointments took effect this year because the council was unable to act within that time limit.

Waiting until the next committee meeting would have made the council's action moot, Allen said, so the council flexed its prerogative and voted "no" on Leach.

The rejection is not meant to be a reflection on Leach's qualifications, Allen said, and the mayor may resubmit the nomination.

- Voted to formally ask the acting director of public property to prepare the Board of Aldermen chamber at City Hall for meetings of council committees. The committees now meet in the cramped office of the city clerk, and most council members say that is very inadequate.

The chamber, where the audibility of voices can be problematic, may require physical alteration to accommodate the meetings.

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