



GO TO: [Local News Section] [More Community Stories] POST TO:

5.28.99 07:07:36

DARE confronts Sepe on school site

■ Protesters demand assurances that the site will be safe as construction of two schools proceeds and the city pursues its plan to contain hazardous substances there.

By KAREN A. DAVIS
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- Opposition to the construction of two new schools off Hartford Avenue persists even as contractors work this week to complete the second floor of the elementary school and finish driving piles for the middle school.

Yesterday, the protest came from members of Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE), who marched into the office of Alan Sepe, acting director of public properties, and demanded answers.

Leading the protest was 12-year-old Yaritza Hernandez, a member of DARE's school safety campaign committee. The group of about 10 people arrived at Sepe's fourth-floor office in City Hall to find that he was at an out-of-office meeting.

"We're here because we don't want them to build the new school on a toxic waste landfill," Yaritza said, as the group waited for Sepe to return a pager call by his office assistant.

The safety of the 10-acre site at the corner of Springfield Street and Hartford Avenue has remained an issue for several community groups and some residents who live nearby, despite the city's plan to contain the toxic contamination.

When city officials announced plans to build the schools there in February, longtime neighbors questioned whether the site would be environmentally safe, given the fact that it was once home to a municipal landfill and was a popular spot for illegal dumping.

An environmental consultant hired by the city found elevated levels of lead, arsenic and petroleum compounds in soil samples from the site, along with 300,000 cubic yards of waste that extended 26 feet beneath the surface in some areas.

So the city came up with a remediation plan designed to keep the contaminants at a safe depth underground by covering them with two feet of clean fill or concrete slabs upon which the school buildings would sit. The plan calls for an underground system of wells that monitor ground water, vents that would clear potential gases generated by decomposing garbage and inside monitors to alert authorities in case gas does manage to seep into the buildings.

The city is not allowed to implement its remediation plan, however, until it receives approval from the state Department of Environmental Management.

Greg Fine, DEM supervising site engineer, said yesterday that his staff continues to review modifications that the city was asked to make, but that approval of the plan could come in "one or two days."

In the meantime, the city has been literally building around the problem. Contractors have prepared the foundation and built walls on the elementary school, but have left bare the ground floor, so that the underground wells can still be installed.

City officials have rushed to begin the project in order to have the entire elementary school and much of the middle school ready for the first day of school Sept. 1.

Yesterday, DARE members protested the fact that information about contaminants found at the site and the plan to contain the materials was not made available to the public until about a month ago.

DARE member Takina Greene said the lack of information and the fact that the information appeared to be withheld from the public, the City Council and the School Board have caused many residents to wonder if they can trust assertions that the site will be made safe. (Both the City Council and the School Board have approved the project, but not without questions about the future safety of the site and criticism over the lack of information.)

Once Sepe returned to his office, he promised the protesters that he would provide them with copies of the testing results and the remediation plan by next Friday.

DARE told Sepe they had documents that showed the city's consultant did not test the site for all hazardous materials. Sepe disputed that charge, saying the site was tested for every substance mandated by the state.

"Is this school going to be safe?" Greene asked Sepe after he sat down at his desk and began fielding questions from the group.

"The school is going to be safe," Sepe responded. And he tried to assure the group that the site would stay that way because the remediation plan calls for the buildings to be monitored for the next 20 years.

Sepe agreed to the group's demands to send them copies of the monitoring reports, which are to be done quarterly by an independent consulting firm for at least the first five years.

After some discussion, Sepe agreed to include DARE members in meetings to report the monitoring results -- if such meetings are held.

"But why would you build a school on a toxic landfill?" Greene pressed.

"It is not toxic," Sepe said, adding that the group was misinformed about the level of contamination. Sepe told the protesters that, in fact, contractors would be using four to six feet of clean fill to encapsulate the site, not just two feet as they have said in the past. He said the extra fill is needed to bring the school site up to the level of surrounding land.

DARE members left the meeting vowing to return if they don't receive the test results and remediation plan by next Friday.

Afterwards, Sepe said the city is trying to accommodate community concerns. For example, it has taken out the ballfield that neighbors felt would encroach upon their land; in addition to the two-story elementary school and the three-story middle school, the site will have basketball courts, a soccer field and a park to replace the ballfield, Sepe said.

Greene said DARE members are still not convinced that the site is safe, no matter how pretty the buildings may look three months from now.

"Sure, they may look pretty; but is the result going to be pretty if you send your children there?" Greene said. "They can tell us whatever they want, but the problem is we have not been informed and we still don't know if they are telling us everything. How are we going to trust what they're saying when they're not even doing what they are supposed to be doing?"

Add ~~your own content~~ on this topic

[Back to top](#)

Copyright © 1999 The Providence Journal Company
Produced by www.projo.com

