

Park Hill residents frustrated by lack of answers on contaminated homes

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Park Hill residents meet with EPA to discuss conta...: The Environmental Protection Agency talks with residents over the Black Leaf chemical site and the elevated levels of toxic pollutants in the area in Louisville, Kentucky. (By Scott Utterback, The Courier-Journal) June 14, 2012

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Art Smith with the EPA addresses questions by Park Hill residents after a meeting by the EPA to talk with local residents over the Black Leaf chemical site and the elevated levels of toxic pollutants in the area in Louisville, Kentucky. June 14 , 2012



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Park Hill resident Mike Sheckles ask questions of members of the EPA during a meeting by the EPA to talk with local residents over the Black Leaf chemical site and the elevated levels of toxic pollutants in the area in Louisville, Kentucky. June 14 , 2012

On the map at the front of the room, Michael Sheckles saw the neighborhood where he grew up.

He saw the old, abandoned factory where he and his friends used to hop the fence to play tag and hide and seek. And there was the alley where they splashed in puddles after rain storms.

Now 39, Sheckles looked at the birds-eye view of his house projected on a screen and shaded bright green to indicate that his land and others in the 1700 block of Wilson Avenue are contaminated with lead.

Sheckles packed into a room at Wheatley Elementary School Thursday night with about 50 other residents from the Park Hill neighborhood while U.S. Environmental Protective

Agency on-site coordinator Art Smith told them the news: At least nine chemicals — including lead, arsenic, DDT and dieldrin — had made their way into the soil of residents' yards around the 29-acre Black Leaf industrial site.

In February, EPA workers took soil samples from 51 lots around the Black Leaf site. All 50 had tested positive for above-normal chemical levels — meaning there was a risk factor of one in 1 million for developing cancer from a lifetime of exposure.

On two blocks in the area, the concentration of arsenic was higher, Smith said, enough to raise the chance of cancer to 1 in 10,000.

“Where are they?” the crowd asked.

Smith told them the 1500 and 1600 blocks of Wilson Avenue were affected. Residents buzzed.

Smith said the EPA had tested 50 lots and will test more.

Right now, he said, he isn't sure if water or wind had carried the pollutants into residents' yards. Workers will test up wind, down wind, to the left and right of the Black Leaf site, further out than the first test.

When the next test will happen, though, he couldn't say.

“We got a mixed bag (of results),” Smith said. “And what that tells us is that we're not done sampling in this area.”

Bob Safay, regional director for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, took the floor to put the contamination into perspective.

He told residents that the contaminants were also present in items such as household pesticides that many people are commonly exposed to. And if residents were born before 1970, he said, they had likely grown up in houses with lead-based paint.

Afterward, Safay said he thought the meeting had gone well.

“People have sincere questions,” he said. “People are worried about their children, their health and their property value.”

It didn't satisfy Sheckles.

"I want to get human tested," he said, adding that his mother had lived in the house in Wilson Avenue for 60 years before she died of respiratory disease in 2009.

Sheckled said he had developed sarcoidosis, a disease that inflames his lungs. He wants to know if it's from his childhood play place.

"I know the place has been a dump for years, " he said. "What are they going to do about it?"

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