LONG ISLAND / ENVIRONMENT

Report: More soil contamination found outside Bethpage ballfield

The newly discovered groundwater contamination near Bethpage Community Park isn't deemed an immediate public health threat because it is confined to a low permeability clay layer about 40 feet below the parking lot, which remains open, said Martin Brand, deputy state environmental conservation commissioner. Credit: Newsday/John Keating

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Cleanup of Bethpage Community Park's contaminated ballfield is underway, even as regulators learn the extent of newly identified Grumman pollution that could further delay the facility's full reopening.

Grumman's successor, Northrop Grumman, activated the long-planned system to heat and remove volatile organic compounds from ballfield soil on Aug. 26, marking the start of a six- to nine-month process. But that promptly was followed by a report from company consultants to the state Department of Environmental Conservation outlining results of new sampling from outside the ballfield, which has been closed since 2002.

The Sept. 28 report found volatile organics in soil at levels as high as 420 parts per million — more than 40 times the state's target cleanup goals — beneath some areas of the adjacent parking lot and in one spot leading up to the nearby skate park.

"We'll definitely be requiring Grumman to do something about this," Martin Brand, deputy state environmental conservation commissioner, said in an interview.

He noted, however, that the newly discovered contamination isn't deemed an immediate public health threat because it is confined to a low permeability clay layer about 40 feet below the parking lot, which remains open.

"We think we've fairly well-delineated the area," Brand said. "It's not the whole parking lot."

The recent testing expanded on Northrop Grumman's findings late last year of soil contaminants of up to 150 parts per million in select areas just outside the previously designated ballfield cleanup boundaries. That discovery had frustrated residents and officials who wondered how regulators and the polluter were still grappling with the extent of the park's soil contamination after all these years.

Grumman donated the 18 acres of land that would become Bethpage Community Park to the Town of Oyster Bay in 1962. But it wasn't widely disclosed until 2002 that a roughly 3.5-acre portion of the land — where the ballfield was built — had been the aerospace giant's chemical waste disposal site.

The park has come to represent the corporate and regulatory failures that created the larger groundwater contamination now spreading beneath Bethpage and surrounding communities. Newsday highlighted the site in a February investigation, "The Grumman Plume: Decades of Deceit," that detailed a history of deceptive statements, missteps and minimization that long slowed cleanup of the pollution that has become Long Island's most intractable environmental crisis.

"The more you look for something, eventually, you're going to find it," Bethpage Water District Superintendent Michael Boufis, a longtime advocate for a full cleanup, said of the newly identified soil contamination beneath the town park.

Brian Nevin, a spokesman for the Town of Oyster Bay, said in a statement that the town is reviewing the new data and working with the state and Northrop Grumman to "develop a cleanup strategy."

"This contamination will obviously take time to clean up," Nevin said, noting that the town, despite its input into the process, can only control so much. "If we ultimately do not agree with the final decisions, we always have the option [of] legal action."

All parties, however, at least see the progress in the ballfield's cleanup as good news. For many years, the blighted, overgrown area has been a symbol of Grumman pollution, and was fenced off from the remainder of the park, which largely reopened in the mid-2000s.

"Our data shows the system is operating effectively and we expect to operate the system until early to mid-2021," Northrop Grumman spokesman Tim Paynter said in a statement.

After the thermal well system has heated the volatile organic compounds and removed them to state standards, additional soil borings will be drilled to confirm its success. Once the soil has fully cooled, Northrop Grumman can begin excavating the toxic metals and polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCBs, that also are still present.

"We remain committed to pursuing scientifically sound, targeted and effective remedial approaches that protect the health and well-being of the community and avoid unnecessary disruption," Paynter said.

An entire generation of children haven't had access to the ballfield, but officials, absent the new parking lot problem, had envisioned the cleanup being done by the end of next year, allowing the field to possibly return to public use by the 20th anniversary of its closure, in May 2022.

"It's a good milestone for the park," Brand said of the ballfield cleanup being underway in earnest.

That still leaves cleanup of the larger groundwater plume — now 4.3 miles long, 2.1 miles wide and as much as 900 feet deep. Boufis and the Bethpage Water District continue to push for the state to finalize an agreement with Northrop Grumman and the U.S. Navy, which is also responsible for the plume, to begin work on an aggressive $585 million containment and remediation plan.

In the meantime, the district also continues to push for the soil cleanup of the park, even though it's not directly related to the larger groundwater pollution.

"Some people say it has nothing to do with the Water District, so why are we being so vocal about it?" Boufis said. "But it has something to do with our community."

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