Albany project put on state Superfund list

Wellington Row commercial development complex site tainted by chemicals

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ALBANY -- Part of the "Wellington Row" property now being cleared for a commercial complex and 11-story office tower near the state Capitol has been added to the state Superfund pollution cleanup program.

Land at 67 Howard St. is contaminated with mercury and several carcinogenic volatile organic compounds left behind decades ago by the former Albany Laboratories, according to a Superfund notice from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The contaminated property is at the rear of Wellington Row, where developers have demolished all but the facades of five buildings, including the Wellington Hotel, and plan a complex that could include an 11-story office tower.

A cleanup at the site began in mid-2008, said DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino. While the pollution presents no current threat to public health, it could threaten workers involved in any future construction or "on-site ground-intrusive activities," the DEC notice said.

Demolition on the site has been going on since the end of 2009.

"All soil contaminants above soil cleanup objectives had been removed," she said. But DEC still needs to investigate whether pollution has moved underground to other sites nearby, such as the former Dewitt Clinton hotel, where pollution vapors from soil were found last summer.

The state Health Department is also investigating potential health risks, the notice said, but no further information was available Thursday from the Health Department's Public Information Office.

Contaminated soil was removed from the site last month, and also in September and October 2008, when 450 tons were taken away, Severino said. Pollution included tetrachloroethene, trichloroethene, benzene, toluene, ethyl benzene, xylene, and other chlorinated volatile organic compounds.

Tetrachloroethene, also called PERC, is a chemical used in dry-cleaning, including clothes. According to the state Health Department, long-term exposure to PERC, which easily vaporizes and can be inhaled, increases the risk of certain types of cancers.

Last summer, levels of both TCE and PERC were found in soil vapor "immediately adjacent to the former Dewitt Clinton Hotel," Severino said.

Trichloroethene, also called TCE, is likely to cause cancer in humans, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said. TCE is used to degrease machinery.

Last summer, levels of both TCE and PERC were found in soil vapor "immediately adjacent to the former Dewitt Clinton Hotel," Severino said.

Mercury found there was likely due to the "historic urban fill," Severino said.

The pollution on the Wellington site was discovered in July 2007 when a large underground storage tank and tainted soil were found, she said.

The property is owned by Columbia Eagle LLC, a subsidiary of Columbia Development Companies, an Albany-based firm associated with BBL Construction Services. Columbia Eagle bought the property and the crumbling vacant hotel for $925,000 in 2007 from London developers Sebba Rockaway Ltd.

Calls to Columbia President and owner Joseph Nicolla for comment were not returned.

Severino said DEC is negotiating a consent order with Columbia Eagle LLC.

Albany Laboratories dates from the 1920s, according to city historian Tony Opalka. The company was still listed as the occupant of the property as recently as 1985, according to city directories. It could not be immediately determined when the company closed.

In 1981, the company was fined $7,400 by DEC for violations of pesticide regulations. The company allegedly sold an unregistered, mislabeled commercial pesticide to a woman who used it in her home, sickening her husband.

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