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Much Is Riding on Soil Tests at Two Sites

By JOHN RATHER

RESIDENTS in two Long Island villages, Manorhaven and Port Jefferson, are learning more than they wanted to know about an environmental problem known as soil vapor intrusion.

Similar learning experiences may lie ahead for thousands of other home and business owners in communities near scores of current and former industrial sites in Nassau and Suffolk Counties -- with an uncertain effect on their property values.

Soil vapor intrusion involves plumes of groundwater laced with once-common industrial solvents that can evaporate and rise through soil to invade homes and other buildings. State and federal agencies are stepping up testing in response to evidence that health threats posed by the vapors, including elevated cancer risks, may be far greater than once believed.

Officials say that devices as simple as perforated pipes can harmlessly vent vapors from soil into outdoor air. But sellers who know of soil vapor problems on their property are required by law to reveal them to potential buyers. And the understanding of the risks from exposure to indoor vapors is still evolving.

In Manorhaven, the State Department of Environmental Conservation will soon have results of groundwater and soil vapor tests at the 1 Toms Point Lane co-ops, 127 units on Manhasset Bay.

The complex, where sale prices now average \$342,500, is next door to the former Thypin Steel plant, an 11-acre site where the presence of trichloroethene, a suspected carcinogen also known as trichloroethylene or TCE, has been confirmed in groundwater.

A map produced by consultants for the site's owners, MBA-Manorhaven L.L.C., which is carrying out a voluntary cleanup under state direction, shows groundwater on the industrial property flowing south, directly toward the neighboring co-ops.

In Port Jefferson, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has completed a first round of soil vapor testing north of the former Lawrence Aviation plant, a federal Superfund site just outside village boundaries in Port Jefferson Station.

The agency has mapped a solvent-tainted plume almost a mile long and 1,000 to 1,500 feet wide. It appears to begin at the plant, a former manufacturer of titanium that an E.P.A. official, Angela Carpenter, described as a potential source of the contaminated plume.

"Groundwater plumes of these chlorinated solvents are unfortunately not all that uncommon," said Ms. Carpenter, who heads the agency's eastern New York remediation section. "This plume is fairly typical of what we see."

Agency officials said that tests in the Port Jefferson high school and the middle school, which are north of Lawrence and within the plume, showed no indoor vapors. But the testing, discussed at a public meeting in the village, did find elevated levels of TCE and another solvent, perchloroethylene, which is also known as PCE or PERC, beneath school buildings.

Robert Aloise, the Port Jefferson school district superintendent, said that the district was awaiting test results and would make them public.

The vapors would pose a problem if they seeped into basements or were drawn inside when furnaces and burners run, creating negative indoor air pressure.

Sal Badalamenti, the project director for the Lawrence Aviation cleanup for the Environmental Protection Agency, said it had tested for vapors under the slabs of 23 of about 60 houses in the plume area. He said that at three houses, TCE levels were high enough to prompt indoor tests, which were done on March 29. Results are incomplete.

Port Jefferson residents are looking for answers but appear to be taking the testing in stride, village officials said. "There does seem to be a certain calm," said the village planning board chairman, James Burke, who has two children attending schools that were tested.

Village officials have not taken up a suggestion by the village engineer, Kevin Koubek, that building projects in or near the contaminated plume be delayed until the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Environmental Conservation give what Mr. Koubek described in a Feb. 13 memo to the planning board as an all-clear.

Matters appeared to be more tense in Manorhaven, where residents of the Toms Point co-ops were closely following the testing there, according to local officials. A local civic and environmental group, Residents for a More Beautiful Port Washington, was also awaiting the

results.

Jamie Ascher, an engineering geologist and the project manager for the Thy-pin site for the Department of Environmental Conservation, said groundwater and soil tests on the co-op property were made in six spots at 10-foot-depth intervals from 10 to 60 feet. He said test results would help show whether the plume ran beneath the co-ops.

Data from the tests will also determine whether the state requires more testing for vapors under building slabs and in basement areas, Mr. Ascher said. The state's environmental and health departments will soon issue new guidelines for soil vapor.

Bruce W. Migatz, a lawyer for the 1 Toms Point Lane Corporation and a resident of the co-ops, said the tests had shown no contamination in the soil or shallow groundwater but had detected contamination in deeper groundwater. He said that contamination is common on Long Island.

"There has been no determination that anybody is in jeopardy of anything," Mr. Migatz said.

He said residents had been advised of the testing and "no one has expressed concern at this point."

The Manorville mayor, Nicholas B. Capozzi, said he saw no reason for alarm. "Everyone knows what is going on, and if there's a problem it will be mitigated," he said. "Sometimes people cry wolf, and they don't hear the other side."

Richard Thy-pin, the manager of MBA-Manorhaven, said in an e-mail message on March 31 that MBA-Manorhaven had spent more than \$2 million to clean up the Thy-pin site. A developer, Island Estates of Melville, is seeking final approval to build 96 luxury town houses on the property, with soil vapor protections that include no living space on ground floors.

Mr. Thy-pin said that contamination there dated back 55 to 65 years, before Thy-pin owned the property. Grumman, now Northrop Grumman, and Republic manufactured aircraft parts there at a time when the federal government owned the land.

He said MBA-Manorhaven had expanded its investigation to the Toms Point co-ops "to see if this old contamination is also present on their property."

Andrew A. Giaccia, a lawyer for MBA-Manorhaven in Washington, said it had not been established that a contaminated plume from the Thy-pin site was running under the Toms Point co-ops. "Its behavior is so complex that you don't know where it is or how it has behaved," he said.