

PROVIDENCE



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Amelia Rose, director of the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, is pleased with the results of the air testing.

Tainted school site monitored

City pays Warwick firm to inspect air at Alvarez High, where silver products factory left pollutants

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PROVIDENCE — The city has been required to pay a Warwick engineering firm more than \$180,000 to inspect and review the air quality and other potential health hazards at Dr. Jorge Alvarez High School, built on a contaminated industrial site in the Reservoir Triangle neighborhood six years ago.

Liz White, a spokeswoman for Mayor Angel Taveras, said that the city hired EA Engineering, Science, and Technology Inc. in July 2008 to collect laboratory samples on possible toxic vapors in the school that has more than 500 students in grades nine through 12.

The testing became mandatory after the city and state

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SCHOOL

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Little evidence of toxic fumes

Department of Environmental Management signed a consent order in 2008 to regularly conduct tests at the high school, which was the site of the former Gorham Manufacturing plant.

Amelia Rose, director of the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, said the regular testing has found “very, very low levels” of toxic vapors that have been produced on the site, which was once declared a brownfield for having decades of accumulated toxic waste in the soil.

“Basically, it has looked like everything is fine,” she said.

At first, the school underwent weekly testing, but that has changed as little evidence of toxic fumes has been detected. The tests were later conducted monthly and now they are done on a quarterly basis.

The school was in the news two weeks ago when the Providence School Board floated the idea of transforming the high school into a middle school. School officials project that there will be 300 more middle school students next year and an additional 500 students the following year.

Students and parents turned out in force to condemn the idea of turning the high school into a school for children in grades six through eight. On Monday night, opponents of the change won. The school board voted unanimously that Alvarez will remain a high school.

Rose, from Environmental Justice, also was pleased. She said despite the low level of toxic vapors at the school, she has concerns about having younger children in the school because they could be more susceptible to health problems.

“I think it’s a legitimate concern,” she said. “Smaller kids are more vulnerable to toxic exposure.”

Gorham Manufacturing, which once owned the site of the school, was a renowned silver products factory whose chief product was spoons of coin silver, and that made jewelry, combs and other small items. It also was a foundry for bronze sculpture. In 1890, the firm moved from downtown Providence to Adelaide Avenue. It was so successful that it opened a store in midtown Manhattan.

In Rhode Island, Gorham sculpted the Independent Man, the statue atop the State House.

Textron bought Gorham Manufacturing in 1967 and ran the business until 1985.

David Sylvestre, Textron’s director of corporate communications, said that environmental investigators discovered toxic waste from the



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Amella Rose, director of the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, talks about the polluted land behind the Alvarez High School.

plant in the late 1980s and remediation work to clean up the polluted site began in 2000. Textron jumped in, he said, and agreed to clean up the brownfield that it had owned for nearly two decades. The manufacturing plant left low levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and metals in the soil as well as low levels of volatile organic compounds in soil gas.

Sylvestre declined to say how much money Textron spent. The Textron Environmental, Health and Safety team oversaw an extensive

overhaul of the site that paved the way for the Alvarez high school to be built, he said.

Among the improvements:

- Remediation of 18,600 tons of soil that were polluted with petroleum compounds.

- Groundwater remediation.

- Excavation and disposal of more than 1,200 cubic yards of waste material that were generated by 100 years of silver manufacturing.

- Installation of a groundwater extraction system to recover and treat polluted groundwater.

- Installation of a vegetative cap along a perimeter of the property that borders Mashapaug Pond.

Textron this month submitted a plan to the state Department of Environmental Management that calls for soil remediation of the remaining portions of property outside the school and the dredging of polluted sediment from Mashapaug Cove.

Those areas, which cover about 15 acres, border the 37-acre cove that is separated from the school grounds by a chain-link fence.

Rose, of the Environmental Justice League, said that Textron has agreed to clean up a 5-acre site that will be transformed into playing fields for students and the public.

"I am impressed that [Textron] has really stepped up and done the right thing," she said.

Rose said that she wants input from the community to determine how the city will overhaul the barren acres into a lively area for soccer, football and other outdoor sports. She also wants to see a boardwalk built around the perimeter of the cove. The city applied for a \$200,000 EPA Brownfields Cleanup Grant a year ago but its application was turned down. Still, Rose and city officials are moving the project forward and they hope that it will be completed within the next two years.

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