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Keith Middle School site earns 'Dirty Dozen' tag

By AARON NICODEMUS, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD -- A Boston-based environmental activist group has labeled the site of the new Keith Middle School as one of its "Dirty Dozen" of the most polluted industrial sites throughout New England.

"There are toxic chemicals in this soil that could pose a serious health threat to teachers and students for generations to come," said Johanna Neumann, community organizer for the Toxics Action Center in Boston. "The mayor should halt further construction until the top 12 feet of contaminated soil is removed."

Holding signs that said "ABCs not PCBs," a small crowd of neighbors and state Rep. Mark Howland stood to demand that the city address their concerns over pollutants at the site.

"This administration should not forge ahead without fully addressing all of the contaminants on this site," Rep. Howland said. "We can only hope this award wakes up the administration to deal with this problem."

Brian Woolley of Summit Street, who formed a community group called Wasted Away in response to neighborhood concerns about pollutants on the site, said he is not opposed to building a school on the site -- but not on top of pollutants that are known to cause cancer.

"I've been saying this for the last four years," Mr. Woolley said. "The site needs to be cleaned up before a school should be built there."

Mayor Frederick M. Kalisz Jr. said he and the school administration have no intention of changing their plans for the development of a \$53.6 million Keith Middle School, which is slated to open on the site in September 2006.

"We've done extensive testing and studying there, with the oversight of DEP and EPA, and kept the public informed throughout the entire process," Mayor Kalisz said. "Research was done, a plan was developed, and with the oversight from the state and federal agencies, we're moving forward. I'm very confident that we will have a school that is safe and conducive to education, and I'm confident in the process that's taking place."

Deputy School Superintendent Dr. Ronald Souza said the school would not be built if state or federal agencies declared the site unsafe. "If we had reports the site was unsafe, we would immediately put a stop to the project," he said. "We have the authorization to move forward, and the DEP is working with us on every step."

Once the site of a city landfill, the former McCoy Field on Hathaway Road is contaminated with lead and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The city has spent \$7.5 million to clean up the site, removing nearly 30,000 tons of contaminated soil in the process and trucking it to an out-of-state landfill. The plan calls for three feet of clean soil and an impermeable barrier to be



PETER PEREIRA/The Standard-Times
Environmentalists representing Toxics Action League congregate across the street from the site of the future Keith Middle School on Hathaway Road yesterday.

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placed down over the site, and then have the school built on a concrete slab. More than 600 pilings have been driven down into the soil, through the impermeable barrier.

Parking lots will cover most of the rest of the site, and there will be no playing fields. The remaining soil has been tested and found to be within limits set by the state Department of Environmental Protection and, occasionally, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The cleanup and capping of the contaminated soil is being overseen by the DEP.

Business manager Lawrence Oliveira, who is the administrator most directly involved with the day-to-day construction of the new middle school, said he is convinced the site will be safe.

"They have their agenda, and they can give out all the awards they want. Based on what we've done for the past four years, I feel very safe and very confident that students, faculty and staff will be working and learning in a very healthy environment," Mr. Oliveira said.

Mr. Oliveira said it would cost between \$20 million and \$30 million to remove all of the contaminated soil on the site and replace it with clean soil. He questioned where Mr. Woolley produced the 12-foot figure.

Ms. Neumann and Mr. Woolley went to City Hall to give the Dirty Dozen "award" to the mayor. They met with the mayor's chief administrative officer, Steven Furtado, who told Mr. Woolley the award will give the city a black eye, and that Mr. Furtado was "disappointed" in Mr. Woolley for contacting the Toxics Action League.

Two other New Bedford sites have received "Dirty Dozen" awards in the past: Brittany Dyeing and Printing in 2001 and Allegheny Rodney Metals in 2000. The coal ash dump in Freetown also received a Dirty Dozen award in 2000.

Only once before has the award been given to a school site. In 1999, the Toxics Action Center gave a Dirty Dozen award to the city of Quincy, for proposing to build its new high school on a former landfill. The high school was eventually built on another site.

Among the other sites labeled as part of this year's dirty dozen were a landfill in Maine, a nuclear power plant in Vermont, a paper company in New York and a power plant in New Hampshire.

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