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Lawmakers ask DEP to assure new Keith will be safe for children
 By AARON NICODEMUS, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD -- Citing "great public outcry and questions" surrounding the construction of a new Keith Middle School on a contaminated city dump site, the city's legislative delegation has requested that the commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection provide them with an update on the project.

"The news of contamination has generated great public outcry and questions arising on whether the school should continue to be built on this property," stated the letter to DEP commissioner Robert W. Golledge Jr. The letter was signed by Sen. Mark C.W. Montigny, D-New Bedford, Rep. John Quinn, D-Dartmouth, and Reps. Robert Koczera, Antonio F.D. Cabral and Steven Canessa, all of New Bedford.

"The cost of the project has increased \$12.6 million due in large part to the cleanup efforts. To ensure that Keith Junior High will be safe for the children who will go to school there we would like your assessment of the situation," the letter said.

Sen. Montigny, who graduated from Keith Junior High, said the DEP needs to convince parents, teachers, neighbors and legislators that the new Keith can be built safely on the site.

"I feel this is so sensitive, and potentially manipulated on so many political fronts, that we need the DEP to tone down the rhetoric and give us the facts," Sen. Montigny said. "If there's any hazard to kids or neighbors, this project needs to be shut down until we get answers. If the DEP cannot unequivocally, and in writing, say that this site can be made safe, than we have a real problem."

Rep. Quinn said that a written response is necessary to provide clarification on what the state's environmental experts think on the issue. "We want to get it clarified now before the state starts spending more money on a site that can't be built on," he said.

The state School Building Authority is funding 90 percent of the cost of the project, now estimated to be \$66 million.

The legislators also asked Commissioner Golledge for his "estimation as to whether the current site can be sufficiently cleaned so that no child's health will be at risk." The letter also seeks an update on the project, including the current status of the cleanup, and a determination of what parties would be responsible for the cleanup.

City officials announced recently that the cost of a new Keith on a former city dump, located on Hathaway Boulevard across from New Bedford High School, is estimated to be \$66 million. Of that total, \$10 million is estimated to

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be for cleaning the site and preparing it for the new school. Approximately \$7 million of that money has already been spent, and city officials say they have entered into contracts for much of the construction costs.

The site, formerly McCoy Field, is contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), as well as lead, barium and other pollutants. The city has submitted a plan to the DEP and the federal Environmental Protection Agency to leave much of the contaminated soil in place, cover it with a plastic barrier and three feet of clean soil, and build the school over it. Both agencies are assessing the city's plan to cap the site.

A meeting between the city, the DEP, the EPA and neighbors is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Wednesday in the library at Keith Junior High School.

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