

PCB dump looms over Allendale Elementary School

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PITTSFIELD -- A foul ball from the baseball diamond at Allendale Elementary School could land on a large, brown mound that looms over the school yard from the other side of a chain-link fence.

The mound — 38 feet high and covered in brown mulch — is a toxic dump that is home to thousands of cubic yards of PCB-contaminated waste taken from the General Electric plant, the Housatonic River and elsewhere. It will not grow any taller but will continue to stretch at the edges; within the next few years, it will cover 5.6 acres.

The landfill was once a ravine that, over several decades, GE filled with toxic waste and debris, according to records from the state Department of Environmental Protection. When the decision to keep the dump and add to it was made in 1998, it was little more than an abstract concept. But the landfill — called Hill 78 — is growing day by day and, with every new truckload of waste, it becomes more visible and more unsettling.

Parents and teachers are growing increasingly concerned about the well-being of children who attend Allendale and play on its fields. Nearby residents are complaining that they see dust blowing off the mound and toward their homes. Though the dump is part of a federally approved cleanup, few seem comfortable with its proximity to where people live and children learn.

Allendale has seen more than its share of controversy.

It was built in the 1950s on PCB-contaminated dirt fill that General Electric gave its workers and the community for free. After the pollution was discovered in 1991, most of the grounds were capped, despite the protests of residents and parents. In 1999, the cap was removed, and GE dug up 41,000 cubic yards of polluted soil and rebuilt the baseball diamond, soccer field and playground.

Last week, about 85 concerned parents and residents sat on folding chairs in the gym of Allendale elementary. They watched an EPA presentation explaining Hill 78 and two other sites that will become toxic dumping grounds on the 250-acre GE plant. Though the EPA's

presenter, Sharon Hayes, made several attempts to explain that the landfills will be safe, that the air and water around them will be monitored to ensure no pollution escapes, no one in the audience seemed convinced.

Dozens raised their hands and several shouted questions, asking, "Would you let your children play here?" "Would you live next to the dump?" They called for the government to test the air and the dust inside the school to see whether it is contaminated, but the EPA and state Department of Environmental Protection representatives refused, saying it was unnecessary.

When one audience member asked who tests the air and water around the landfill now, Hayes said it is GE's responsibility. The crowd groaned.

Denice Yon, the mother of a 7-year-old Allendale pupil, seemed to sum up how many felt, saying, "It's not infallible, and our children play here. That's our concern."

EPA says site is safe

The EPA has been a constant presence in Pittsfield for the past 10 years, wrestling with GE over the PCB pollution that is the longest-lived legacy of the once-booming, but now quiet, transformer plant.

GE used PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, for decades in the giant electrical transformers it manufactured. The chemical was banned in 1977, however, and is suspected of causing cancer in people and of contributing to developmental disabilities such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorder in children.

In a telephone interview, Dean Tagliaferro, the EPA's project manager for the Pittsfield cleanup, said he has heard the concerns from parents, residents and environmentalists.

"I can understand that they are concerned. They see waste being consolidated near a school. I think their concerns are legitimate and I think the action EPA is taking — and we will look to see if we need to take additional actions — are protective of the area and of human health."

GE spokesman Peter O'Toole said "nothing has changed in terms of our work at Hill 78." The company is monitored by both the EPA and the state Department of Environmental Protection, he said, and will go on with the landfilling as part of the overall cleanup.

Because Hill 78 was a dumping ground long before the cleanup agreement was created in 1998, it was never formally designed to be a permanent landfill, so there is no protective liner underneath it. That means the pollution could seep into the groundwater or migrate

underground, either toward the Housatonic River or toward Allendale. Unless GE and EPA want to dig up the entire site, there will be no liner.

The EPA says the natural flow of the groundwater is away from the school and the pollution should be contained after a cap of manmade material, clay, soil and grass is placed on top. And it says the water will be monitored; if it shows signs of contamination in the future, action can be taken to deal with it before the pollution spreads.

"The key concern that I would have would be not having a liner," said Jim Warren of North Carolina Waste Awareness and Reduction Network, an environmental group that successfully fought for the cleanup of a PCB dump in North Carolina (see related story, this page). "That is just about unconscionable in this day and age."

Nearby, another toxic dump is being built, this one called Building 71. It will have a liner on the bottom to keep pollution in place. While Hill 78 can receive debris containing PCBs in concentrations no greater than 50 parts per million, there will be no limit on the pollution that goes into Building 71.

And another landfill could be built near New York Avenue and Merrill Road. It, too, would have a liner and a cap and be eligible to hold material with PCBs greater than 50 parts per million.

For the two new landfills, GE is digging a broad, shallow hole and lining it with a plastic material that is about 15 times as thick as the plastic sheets one typically buys at the hardware store. Once that liner is in place, the toxic waste will be piled on top of it and eventually covered with another layer of manmade material, then clay, dirt and grass, so the waste will be encapsulated.

Key bargaining point

When representatives from the EPA, GE, Pittsfield and others negotiated the deal in 1998 to clean the plant, the Housatonic River and properties throughout the city, GE worked to keep the Hill 78 landfill where it was and add to it.

The city opposed the on-site landfills, and the City Council voted to protest them. But the dumps survived in the final compromise, which took the form of a consent decree that was finalized in October 2000.

Thomas E. Hickey Jr., a former City Council president who was at the negotiating table during those talks, is now the executive director of the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority that is working to redevelop more than 50 acres of the GE plant.

"The city of Pittsfield, the City Council and the mayor went on record against it," Hickey said of the landfill. "We did not want to have an on-site consolidation area. EPA came back with plans that would make it safe and acceptable, and it became a key bargaining point in getting the settlement."

O'Toole, the GE spokesman, did not respond to requests for comment on why the company wanted the landfills, but environmentalists say the company's motive appears to be money. It is expensive to dig up contaminated debris and haul it by train or truck to an acceptable site. By taking one of the most polluted spots on its plant and turning it into a permanent dump, GE was killing two birds with one stone: Not only could it leave the pollution in place, but it could take building debris from its plant and polluted sediment from the Housatonic and dump it in Pittsfield.

Though the city government had opposed the on-site dumps, the City Council and former Mayor Gerald S. Doyle Jr. put those concerns aside when it signed the consent decree that included them.

Since the agreement was finalized, thousands of tons of PCBs have been removed from the Housatonic, the plant and backyards and businesses around Pittsfield, with the EPA and GE sharing most of the costs. The total price tag of the cleanup mandated by the decree has been estimated at \$700 million.

The Housatonic River Initiative, an environmentalist group, opposed the consent decree, partly because of the provisions allowing the landfills. Tim Gray, HRI's executive director, said he still hopes the agreement can be amended someday to remove Hill 78.

"It was a terrible mistake to put more PCBs on top of the worst toxic place on the plant site," Gray said. His group urged the EPA to treat the PCBs rather than landfill them. "That would have been the best solution, to get rid of them once and for all. Our backup position was that the city of Pittsfield leaders and environmentalists would get together and find a better place to put them that's not next to the children."

Valerie Andersen, a substitute teacher who sometimes works at Allendale, said she has been in the playground and seen dust blowing off the landfill and toward the children. While the EPA says it is clean soil, she is not reassured.

To Andersen, it's not much of a cleanup if the end result will be pollution next to a playground.

"That's no cleanup, if you ask me," she said. "Taking dirt from one place and dumping it in another place is not a cleanup — it's a transfer."