



HOPE VI: Arsenic found at site

By Mark Scheer
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— HOUSING: High levels south of Centre Avenue draw attention from health officials.

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The presence of arsenic on a portion of the HOPE VI housing development site in the city's north end has drawn the attention of local and state health officials.

Both the county and state health departments have asked the developer working for the Niagara Falls Housing Authority to present them with more detailed plans for addressing high levels of arsenic found on a strip of land south of Centre Avenue.

The housing authority's developer, Norstar Development USA, intends to convert the 15-acre parcel which once served as a rail yard into a residential area with rental housing units.

A spokesman for the development company said the area in question is being redeveloped under a soils management plan that has already been approved by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

"If we find that the soil is not adequate, we will build the units on soil that is clean," said Linda Goodman, Norstar's Director of Project Development.

In April, the state Health Department flagged the development site for further review after examining project reports prepared by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and finding arsenic levels greater than 90 parts per million. Acceptable arsenic levels for residential cleanup are 16 parts per million.

The Niagara County Health Department registered concerns of its own, saying it wants more information about the developer's plans for making sure the area is clean before construction begins. Both agencies expressed concern about the potential for privately owned homes to be built on the site, suggesting such development could lead to exposure for potential purchasers if they dug too deep into the ground as part of routine maintenance or property improvement projects.

"It is a concern, but we believe that it can be mitigated," said Niagara County's Director of Environmental Health James Devald.

Under Norstar's cleanup plan, Goodman said existing soil in the area will be removed to a depth of two feet and replaced with clean fill. Goodman said the area will not include any home ownership units and the plans call for the construction of rental housing units only.

Those units, she said, will fall under what is known as "institutional control," meaning residents will have restrictions on what they can and cannot do on the property as a condition of being allowed to live there.

Goodman said elevated arsenic levels are not uncommon in large-scale development projects, especially in urban settings like the HOPE VI project in the Falls.

"In almost every urban lot — probably in a lot of people's yards — you are going to find arsenic," she said.

In an April 28 letter, a copy of which was obtained by the Niagara Gazette, state Public Health Specialist Matthew Forcucci noted that soil sampling identified levels of arsenic in the area

that "greatly exceed" allowable levels for such a project. The letter asks for additional soil sampling to be conducted on site and suggests that any contaminated fill be removed from the area before construction proceeds.

A May 5 letter from Devald expresses similar concerns and indicates that the county health department cannot approve the portion of the project without more detailed information about the property and plans to remove "undesirable fill." After receiving a response from the environmental firm working on the project, Devald sent another letter on June 4, requesting additional clarification on several issues, including an explanation of whether the area will include home ownership units and if additional soil testing will be conducted on site.

"We need more information and the state health department needs some more information," Devald said.

In the meantime, crews are still at work on other portions of the HOPE VI project. Norstar has started Phase I, which calls for the construction of 130 units, including 115 rental units and 15 homes that will be made available for private purchase. The majority of those units will be built to the west of Center Court, along Beech Avenue and Aaron Griffin Way.

"This is going to be the newest residential development in Niagara Falls in 20 years and the area is going to be cleaned according to DEC standards," she said.

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