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Subject: article

Senate to Hold Hearing in Hoosick Falls

From the Morning Memo:

On Tuesday, August 30 at 10:30 a.m., the state Senate will hold a long-awaited hearing on water contamination in Hoosick Falls.

The hearing at Hoosick Falls High School is to be held jointly by the Senate Health and Environmental Conservation committees chaired respectively by Sens. Kemp Hannon and Tom O'Mara. Sen. Kathy Marchione, who represents the area, will also attend.

According to a GOP insider, the goal of the hearing is twofold. During the day, the senators will call experts from various agencies including the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and New York's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and Department of Health (DOH).

This will primarily be for information-gathering purposes, including whether overlapping jurisdictions or lack of communication or perhaps even sheer negligence led to what many consider to be a sluggish response to PFOA contamination in the town water supply. PFOA is considered toxic, and elevated levels have been linked to certain cancers.

As for the second part of the hearing, the senators will hear directly from the public. Individuals will be permitted to sign up in advance and testify during the afternoon, or beginning at 5 p.m., when people start to come home from work, the committees will allow Hoosick Residents to testify as walk-ins on a first come first serve basis.

The idea here is to hear from people who may still have fears about what they or their children have been exposed to. But it is also an opportunity to have elected officials simply listen to their stories, including what it has been like to live under this cloud for the last several months.

The story of Hoosick Falls is nothing short of a tragedy.

The primary charge of government at all levels is to protect the citizenry, and it appears as though that may not have happened in Hoosick Falls. While PFOA contamination is believed to have leeched into the ground water from the nearby Saint Gobain Plastics factory, this story is less about the polluter and more about whether the concerns from residents of a small town near the Vermont border were taken seriously in a timely enough fashion.

The facts on this remain murky.

While the Cuomo administration eventually kicked it into high gear crisis response mode, serious questions remain about the Department of Health's initial reaction. And some local residents and lawmakers have even questioned the very competency of Cuomo's own Health Commissioner, Howard Zucker.

Complicating this story is the dynamic of those who have chosen to invest in Hoosick Falls by purchasing homes and raising families there. Some residents were reluctant to even go public about the water

contamination, fearing that homes they'd spent their whole lives paying off would suddenly plummet in value as the town became a place no one wanted to live. That is an underreported element to this story, and it makes it all the more heartbreaking.

The state Legislature is doing the right thing by holding these hearings to get to the bottom of what happened, but also to let residents know that their government is functioning on their behalf. There is a system of checks and balances, and the Legislature is here to provide oversight of the executive branch, not just rubber stamp legislation they are given marching orders to pass.

Unfortunately however, the two houses could not come to terms about holding joint oversight hearings, which would have demonstrated a united and bipartisan front. Instead, the Assembly will hold two hearings on its own, beginning the second week of September – one in Albany, the second on Long Island. Those hearings are supposed to address water quality more broadly, not focus solely on Hoosick Falls.

The bottom line is that there is nothing more fundamental than being able to turn on your faucet and trust that the government provided water supply is safe for drinking. It's such a basic right in this country, and for good reason. If you cannot trust that the water being pumped into your home is clean and free of toxins, it makes it very difficult to trust your government about really anything else.