Message

From: Seneca, Roy [Seneca.Roy@epa.gov]
Sent: 4/10/2017 11:32:34 AM
To: Koffi, LaRonda [Koffi.LaRonda@epa.gov]; Gaffney, Kristeen [gaffney.kristeen@epa.gov]; saxe, jennie [saxe.jennie@epa.gov]; Brown, Kinshasa [Brown.Kinshasa@epa.gov]; D'Andrea, Michael [DANDREA.MICHAEL@EPA.GOV]; White, Terri-A [White.Terri-A@epa.gov]; schafer, joan [schafer.joan@epa.gov]; Melvin, Karen [Melvin.Karen@epa.gov]; Leonard, Paul [leonard.paul@epa.gov]
Subject: Philadelphia Inquirer (4-10) On toxic site abandoned for decades, developer sees townhouses sprouting in Chesco

On toxic site abandoned for decades, developer sees townhouses sprouting in Chesco

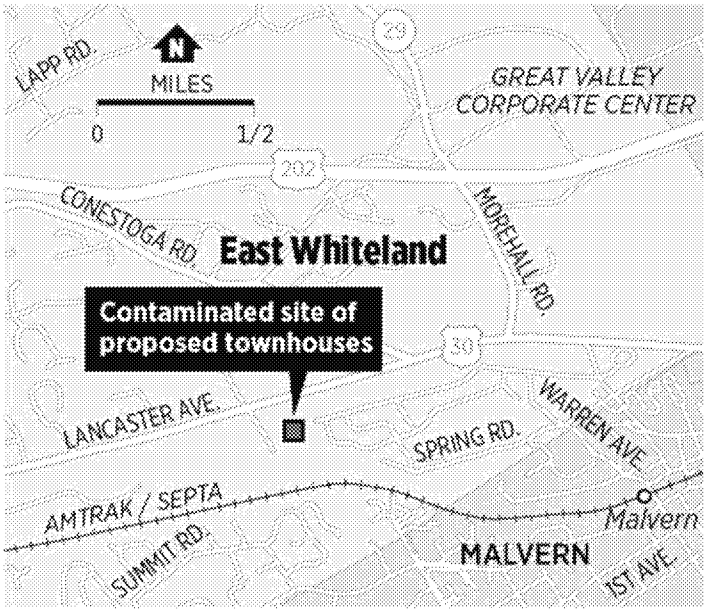
Updated: April 10, 2017 — 6:23 AM EDT
by **Michaelle Bond**, Staff Writer

Asleep after a long day at her social-work job, Peggy Miros was jolted awake by a booming voice through a loudspeaker urging her and her neighbors to evacuate their homes.

A cloud of toxic gas had formed when chemicals accidentally combined at the steel tube manufacturer next to her housing development in East Whiteland Township, Chester County, in the early morning hours of June 9, 1981. In the sultry air, a steady southwest breeze exported the chemical mist toward General Warren Village, 500 yards away, before the cloud dissipated. Some of Miros' neighbors went to the hospital with nausea and skin irritation.

"It was pretty scary," said Miros, who evacuated with her husband, 11-year-old son, and 8-year-old daughter. "We were told to get out of Dodge." They were able to return after a few hours, only to be evacuated again 13 hours later.

The EPA later found trichloroethylene (TCE), a degreasing agent linked to cancer, in the property's groundwater. The former Bishop Tube Co. site, which produced stainless steel tubes from the 1950s until 1999, now is host to graffitied and dilapidated buildings, shattered windows, cracked concrete, and overgrown vegetation, one of more than 450,000 contaminated "brownfields" across the nation.



Staff Graphic

But a prominent local developer says he can make something flourish there: townhouses. J. Brian O'Neill wants to build 228 of them, telling skeptical residents he is their best hope to finally clean up the property, which has languished as the state Department of Environmental Protection has worked to force previous owners of the property to pay for cleanup.

Eight years ago, the department oversaw removal of some of the soil contamination at the site, a spokesman said. Contaminants remain in the surrounding soil, groundwater, Little Valley Creek, and indoor air at the site.

O'Neill said he has developed 100 so-called brownfields from Boston to Washington and will meet state residential standards for contamination levels at this site. He and Constitution Drive Partners LP, an affiliate of O'Neill Properties Group, bought the site in 2005 after offering the only bid, according to the county entity that held the title to the property at the time.

Given the site's history, residents are wary of plans for the property. Neighbors say they fear their families and any new residents could be harmed if workers disturb the polluted soil without removing every bit of contamination.

Last month, 40 people gathered for the first time in the home of one of their neighbors to plan a coordinated effort to oppose the project.

"These people know what they're talking about and they have a right to be concerned," said Maya K. van Rossum, leader of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, who became involved after residents asked her for help.

Some residents oppose any construction at the site and favor making it open space. Some do not want more homes but are open to other uses. Most just want the site cleaned up as thoroughly as possible.

O'Neill initially proposed industrial or commercial plans for the site. But, he said, he shifted to fill what he saw as a need for housing for people working in office parks throughout the Great Valley corridor. In 2014, East Whiteland officials rezoned the property from industrial to residential.

The developer said he plans to dispose of contaminated soil to meet residential standards, which are more strict than for other uses. He said he is "working hand in hand with the DEP every day" and cleaning up the site will cost "millions," although he does not have a final figure.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency monitors the site, which also is part of a Pennsylvania program formed through the Hazardous Sites Cleanup Act of 1988. The program provides funding and authorizes the Department of Environmental Protection to force those who contaminate land to clean it up or reimburse the state for cleanup.

DEP took to court two former property owners, Johnson Matthey Inc. and Whittaker Corp., which installed monitoring wells, "a process that can take a significant amount of time," according to a department spokeswoman. They also submitted remediation reports to the department in 2010 and 2015. DEP expects them to submit a feasibility study this summer that it will use to select the best remedy in addition to O'Neill's efforts.

One problem plaguing state and federal cleanup programs has been lack of money. Federal grant money, an important source for the states, has decreased. Two weeks ago, U.S. Reps. Frank Pallone Jr. (D., N.J.) and Paul Tonko (D., N.Y.) introduced a bill that would increase EPA funding for cleaning and redeveloping contaminated former industrial sites. Such bills have been unsuccessful in the past.

In the meantime, some township officials agree with O'Neill that the developer's cleanup plan will be the fastest route to remediation.

Bill Holmes, chair of the township's Board of Supervisors, told residents at a March 8 meeting that officials were not impeding the project because of the developer's promise to start cleaning up contamination soon.

"And if we oppose, we lose the leverage we have as far as the environmental conditions, which for me, was the most important part in the first place," he said.

O'Neill said he expects zoning approval this month.

David Worst, who worked at the plant from 1972 to 1989 and was a union president, is one of the people who hopes that doesn't happen. After the DEP began looking into the site, Worst walked the property and pointed out areas he knew were contaminated.

"We fought for over a decade to stop light industrial [uses]," said Worst, who said he was "appalled" at the prospect of people living on top of the site, even with the promise of a cleanup to residential standards.

"Our objective was to have this cleaned up [completely]," Worst said. "And once it's cleaned up, then we talk about what to do with it."