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Marston Street lot set for Superfund cleanup

By Keith Eddings
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LAWRENCE — Environmental cleanup crews have converged on a weed-infested industrial lot beside a school to sift through the soil after a half-century of chemical spills.

Real estate brokers also are on the 14-acre property at 207 Marston St., hoping to sell it for nearly \$4 million despite its troubles, but they have run into troubles of their own. Among them, city officials said their proposals to develop the site, including a self-storage facility, are too lowbrow even for a site contaminated by PCBs, lead and other heavy metals from an auto salvage business that operated there for about 50 years.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has designated the property a Superfund removal site and is collecting hundreds of soil samples from the site and the yards of about six residential properties on Hoffman Avenue that abut the industrial land.

The testing, scheduled to be completed Thursday, will allow the EPA to identify the most toxic hot spots and design a cleanup plan that could cost as much as \$1 million, according to Michael Barry, who is coordinating the work for the agency.

Barry could not say whether students and staff at the Parthum middle and elementary schools across Marston Street were exposed to the contaminants — including several that attach to soil and can be carried by the wind — over the years. He said school officials would be alerted when the cleanup begins as early as next month. The work will involve scraping the top foot or so of soil off the most contaminated areas, requiring precautions to minimize the airborne contaminants that could be released.

"We'll be talking to (school officials) about what we found there and what precautions we'll undertake to minimize or eliminate any dust," Barry said. "There will be monitoring going on that will tell us if we're causing dust above levels that could be an issue. We'd stop what we're doing and evaluate."

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Interim School Superintendent Mary Lou Bergeron said she expected the school would notify families as the work begins. She said the building is sealed and air conditioned, which would protect the air quality inside.

The Marston Street site has been an annoyance for neighbors and an environmental thumb in the eye for local, state and federal officials at least since 2005, after the former John C. Tombarello & Sons Salvage Co. closed and control of the property passed to First Lawrence Financial. James Grifoni is president of the company. He also owns the Big-N-Beefy fast-food restaurant on Broadway.

Shortly after taking over at 207 Marston St., Grifoni opened the gates to a training school for tractor-trailer drivers, igniting protests from neighbors about the potentially toxic dust the trucks were kicking up. Grifoni disregarded an order from the city to park the trucks, prompting the EPA to threaten him with fines of up to \$32,500 for each day he continued using the property. Grifoni closed the school in October 2006.

As the environmental issues receded, financial ones mounted. Beginning in 2002, property tax payments were missed, and the city is now owed \$526,704, records show. Late in August, city Treasurer Patricia Cook began what could be a yearslong process of taking the property.

Patrick Blanchette, the city's director of economic development, said the owners will settle the tax bill long before the city can seize the land in court.

Grifoni did not return a phone call.

The next problem will be settling on what comes next.

"This is a prime economic development site and we'd like to see a commercial entity in there creating jobs," Blanchette said. "Some of the individuals claiming ownership say they want a self-storage facility, which would create maybe one job. We'd like to see something better. What about Walmart?"

"That's not going to happen in today's market," said David Stubblebine, a broker with a Lexington real estate firm offering the property. "You're not going to get straight retail or a big box. That window has passed, and with all due respect, they're not going to come to Lawrence, Massachusetts. The big boxes are gone. They're not looking. So the town needs to be somewhat flexible, otherwise they're going to have an eyesore for the next 10 years."

Meanwhile, neighbors along Hoffman Avenue are bracing to have their yards dug up by EPA backhoes this fall or in the spring.



oversight 39 minutes ago

There is no one in the neighborhood using well water.. The soils in the area is not made up of beach sand. Scraping one, two or three feet that is not paved or covered by concrete of the entire site should be enough. Does the public know that there is more pollution from are public roads such as Route 495. Repaving oil and drips from auto anti freeze and transmission oils and engine oils. It is occurring every day there and on all the streets in our cities and towns. Another grocery store would go well there, they employ plenty of people. Coady's is next door. Are they checking his site? I doubt it. His site is similar in use to the former Salvage Co. site that has an intense use with auto wrecks spilling fluid that has been towed there, similar to a salvage yard. This kind of operation has not killed anyone I know of. This is all blown out of proportion. These types of overblown over priced clean ups are out of control ask and interview construction workers who in the past have worked on them they will tell you the truth.

P.S

Notice How Patrick Blanchette treats the old past due real estate taxes different than the Paper Mill property.

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Here's a funny one;

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with all due respect, they're not going to come to Lawrence, Massachusetts.

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"I knew there were issues over there, but I didn't think it was going to affect us as much as it has," said Charles Crafts, a Raytheon technician who raised two sons in a house he bought next to the industrial site 30 years ago. "I'm concerned about what it does to property values. I don't know what we can do. We can't get rid of the property. Nobody would want to buy."



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