

## Toxic cleanup meeting earns tepid support

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Fort Detrick officials were pleased with the community's response at the June 1 public meeting at Waverley Elementary School about a plan to clean up toxic chemicals on the base.

However, some residents still have concerns.

Close to 100 residents were briefed on the plan to create a frozen barrier around trenches in a small area in the southwest corner of the almost 400-acre tract next to Shookstown Road.

"We thought the meeting was an unqualified success. The public response appeared to be positive [and] there were good, concerned questions asked," said Lt. Col. Jeff Springer, chief for Safety and Environment.

But Rochelle Horn, president of the Clover Hill Civic Association, who came prepared with a list of questions, said after the meeting that not all of her concerns were answered.

Fort Detrick plans to insert pipes into the ground at about 2-foot intervals, then fill them with salt water cooled to at least 0 degrees Fahrenheit. The freezing water will freeze the soil around it, creating a layer of permafrost. The soil surrounded by the pipes -- in three trenches identified as containing toxic organic compounds -- will be removed with a backhoe, and the dirt will be hauled out of state for incineration. The contractor will select the incinerator to be used, but there are no facilities in Maryland licensed to burn this type of contaminant.

The entire process, costing \$4.86 million, is expected to be completed in about four months, beginning in February or March 2001.

A large temporary dome, about two-thirds the size of a football field, will be erected over the work site and equipped with an air filtering system to prevent any substances from escaping into the open air, Springer said at the meeting.

"Workmen in personal protective gear will go through the debris," Springer said to the audience. "Any intact containers will be analyzed on-site."

The major compounds expected to be found are trichloroethene (TCE) and tetrachloroethene (PCE), organic solvents that are suspected carcinogens, which have been found at significant levels in area wells.

"We are testing 43 private wells," Springer told the group. "Seven have shown detection ... in excess of 5 parts per billion," the level set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

In October 1997, a spring that runs through the base and serves several neighboring homes' private wells was found to be contaminated with TCE and PCE at levels far exceeding the federal limit. The tests found TCE levels at 5,000 ppb, and PCE at 20,000 ppb.

In November 1997, a test of a monitoring well in Area B found PCE levels between 60,000 and 120,000 ppb.

Several residents asked that Fort Detrick send someone to test their private wells. Springer assured the audience that base would test the well of anyone who asks.

If any well shows signs of contamination, he said, Fort Detrick officials would arrange for the family to get bottled water or be connected to the Frederick City water system.

Horn said the U.S. Army has done a good job providing information, but she remains concerned.

"I think they've been a very responsive group," Horn said. "Whether they've been purposely evasive or not is up to each individual's interpretation."

Horn's concerns revolved around what other contaminants might be in the trenches, what kind of testing the base would conduct to make sure the organic chemicals had been removed, and whether officials have prepared a contingency plan in case of an accident involving hazardous materials.

Springer pointed out that neither TCE nor PCE is explosive or flammable. But Fort Detrick's report on the project said other compounds may be buried at the site. Those could be more combustible, Horn said.

The soil freezing technique, in addition to creating an impenetrable layer to prevent contaminants from leaking, also will slow down the compounds, Springer said, like molasses being poured in January.

"They can come back and explain all they want, and I think they're doing a marvelous PR campaign, but it's only going to be as informative as they wish to present," Horn said.

Springer said he has contacted Horn about making a presentation to her civic association, to give more people a chance to ask questions.

The next step is to prepare a "decision document," Springer said, which summarizes all of the research and recommendations prepared by officials. It also will include all of the questions asked by residents, along with their answers.

The contract to conduct the cleanup project is likely to be awarded this winter.