

Official: State office workers not at risk

By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

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Employees of the downtown Owensboro state office building were told by state officials Wednesday that the building is safe for them to work in, despite the fact that soil beneath the building is contaminated.

Soil at the property contains chlorinated solvents that leached from Concord Custom Cleaners, 218 Frederica St., years ago, a spokesman for the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet said. But as long as that soil is not disturbed, no danger exists for anyone inside the building or on the property's grounds.

Cabinet spokesman Dick Brown said an eight-hour air quality test performed inside the building on March 10, with the heating and cooling system turned off to ensure accuracy, came back clean.

"The test was done in nine locations in the building and the results were given to an independent, third-party lab for an exhaustive analysis for any volatile organic compounds," Brown said. "None of them were detected. There was nothing in the air at levels dangerous to humans. We are very positive there's nothing inside that building that can cause a threat to the health of our workers."

The issue of possible hazardous conditions at the building arose with the news Tuesday that the city of Owensboro may back out of a deal to buy the building from the state because it will cost \$600,000 to resolve the soil problems, according to a well-placed, unnamed source.

The state building at Second and Frederica streets sits where the city wants an upscale hotel built as the anchor for the \$80 million downtown revitalization project. The city's intention has been to buy the state office building and tear it down.

Brown said the state has been aware of the soil contamination problems at the site for years.

"There have been a number of test wells on the site and around the building over the past nine years," he said. "This is an issue within the soil. As long as the soil is not disturbed, there's no threat above the ground."

Anthony Hatton, director of the Kentucky Division of Waste Management, said Concord Custom Cleaners sits slightly higher than the state building and when it released heavier-than-water perchloroethylene (PCE), it reached down to the water table and flowed north to the state office building, eventually contaminating the soil under the building. From there, vapors from the PCE migrated upward through the soil.

In August of 2003, Concord Custom Cleaners injected a lactate material into the ground on its property, which causes PCE to break down. Those injections continued until 2007, Hatton said. In 2006, Concord excavated soil at the PCE release point and replaced the contaminated soil with clean soil.

Monitoring wells were placed at several locations at the cleaners and the state office building. In 2001, a well at the state office building showed a reading for PCE of 2,100 parts per billion and a much later reading was 92 parts per billion, Hatton said. Readings at wells at the cleaners showed even greater declines.

But a recent reading of a state office building well showed what Hatton called a "rebound" to 1,500 parts per billion, which prompted the March 10 air quality test.

"No chlorinated solvents were found at the detection limits," he said. "Those limits are set very low. ... It's very good news. The foundation of that building is doing a fantastic job."

Substances that were detected included ethanol and benzene, but neither above "risk based standards," which are more stringent than Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards, Hatton said. Those substances can come from many sources, including perfume or plants.

More than 200 people work in the state office building.

According to various Internet sources, PCE is a chlorinated hydrocarbon and is regulated by the federal Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, OSHA and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act as a hazardous waste. A spill of 100 pounds of PCE is a Superfund reportable act. OSHA has established a permissible exposure limit in workplace air of 100 parts per million measured as an eight-hour time weighted average.

The following information was found on the New York State Department of Health Web site: PCE is a manufactured chemical that is widely used in the dry-cleaning of fabrics and is also used for degreasing metal parts and in manufacturing other chemicals. It can be found in some paint and spot removers, water repellents, brake and wood cleaners, glues, and suede protectors. For most people, almost all exposure is from PCE in the air caused by evaporation where the chemical is used. It may evaporate from contaminated ground water or soil into the indoor air of buildings above the contaminated area. The major effects of PCE exposure are on the central nervous system, kidney, liver, and possibly the reproductive system.

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