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Dust Stirs Worry in Tour of a Shuttered School

By ROBERT F. WORTH

When a group of teachers from the High School of Economics and Finance went back to tour their shuttered school next to the World Trade Center site, city officials assured them that it had been thoroughly cleaned. The building, which is closer than any other school to ground zero, has been closed since the terrorist attacks and is scheduled to reopen Jan. 30.

But as the teachers began walking the halls on Tuesday, they found a thick layer of dust in the faculty lounge and in one of the elevators. Worried that the dust might be toxic, a union official who accompanied them promptly declared the building unsafe, and now many teachers and parents say they will not return until they are sure that the building has been adequately cleaned.

"We listened for two hours while they told us the place was spotless," said Scott Shaffner, one of the teachers who was present on the tour, organized by the United Federation of Teachers. "Then I touched the ceiling duct of one of the elevators, and my hand came out black — like

tar.

"The feeling was, they weren't being up front, and it makes you wonder what else wasn't done," Mr. Shaffner said.

Last night more than 100 students, teachers, parents, and officials from the New York City Board of Education met at the school, at 100 Trinity Place, to discuss safety issues and hear from environmental experts.

Bernard Orlan, the board's director for health and safety, said the dust remaining in the school is not a safety hazard. The building, which was occupied by the city's Office of Emergency Management in the months after the Sept. 11 attacks, was given a thorough environmental cleaning in December and January, he said. The air was then tested inside and outside the building and found to be safe. The problem, he said, arose when repairs were made to the school's ventilation system and old but harmless dust spread into the air.

"Basically the building is dirty but not environmentally unsafe," said Margie Feinberg, a spokeswoman for the Board of Education. It is being cleaned now to eliminate sur-

face dirt, she added.

Neil Feldscher, a spokesman for Emteque Corp., the environmental firm hired by the school's parent-teacher association, said he conducted tests in the building yesterday but had not collected enough information to make a final judgment.

Students at the school, which was founded in 1993 and specializes in preparing students for careers in finance, have been sharing space at Norman Thomas High School, at 33rd Street and Park Avenue, since Sept. 11. But some parents have moved their children to other schools. The enrollment at Economics and Finance is now 628, about 100 less than it was at the start of the school year, Ms. Feinberg said.

Altogether, five school buildings in the area remain closed, with their students attending classes elsewhere: the High School of Economics and Finance and the High School for Leadership and Public Service at 90 Trinity Place, which are scheduled to reopen Jan. 30, and Public Schools 89, 234 and 150, which are scheduled to reopen Feb. 4, Ms. Feinberg said.

Toxins from Con Ed substations feared at Trade Center site

■ The 2 facilities were housed in 7 World Trade Center, a building that stood and collapsed in the Twin Towers' shadows

By SHARON L. CRENSON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

When the World Trade Center crumbled, the spotlight was on its two majestic towers, not on 7 World Trade Center — a building that stood and collapsed in their shadows.

But 7 WTC was toxic.

It housed two electrical substations owned by Con Edison. And they contained 109,000 gallons of oil and hundreds of pounds of potentially dangerous chemicals set loose when the building fell.

Trace amounts of PCBs, a carcinogen, and larger quantities of sulfuric acid, a possible carcinogen and respiratory irritant, were among the hazards.

Details about some of the pollutants are contained in reports Con Ed made to the state Department of Environmental Conservation beginning Sept. 11. The Associated Press recently obtained the documents from Con Ed.

No one is sure what happened to the chemicals. Because the Environmental Protection Agency quickly had oil, water and other liquids pumped from manholes and basements at the trade center site, some of the pollutants already may have been cleaned up.

Some may have burned, although officials believe that is unlikely. Con Ed knows its transformers, and the oil in them, survived the worst of the trade center fires because the transformers were working until 7 WTC collapsed.

A third possibility is that the chemicals leaked into soil, groundwater and underground infrastructure, according to the Environmental Protection Agency and Con Ed.

The red granite edifice of 7 World Trade Center, once connected to the twin towers by two slender footbridges, tumbled to the ground in a chain reaction several hours after suicide hijackers crashed into the towers. The attacks sent flaming debris hailing down on nearby buildings, igniting 7 WTC in an unstoppable blaze that leveled it. The collapse crushed electrical equipment within.

The two destroyed substations — one-story high and running roughly one-third the length of a city block — housed nine transformers used to reduce high-voltage electricity to the lower levels required by ordinary office and residential buildings.

Ben Damsky of the Electric Power Research Institute, a research consortium composed largely of utility operators, said there was nothing unusual about the chemicals in the substations. Battery banks containing sulfuric acid are essential in any sizable substation. Another of the hazardous chemicals, sulfur hexafluoride, is often used as an insulator when space is at a premium.

"Con Ed is a very alert and conscientious and concerned utility," Damsky said. "They are on top of things."

The matter is a hot button because of public fears about PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, a cancer-causing compound used as a fire retardant in the lubricating and insulating oil of electrical equipment built before 1977.

The newer of Con Ed's two trade center substations was considered virtually PCB-free, but the older one contained oil with trace amounts — up to 50 parts per million — according to the utility's environmental reports.

Under EPA regulations, that ratio isn't high enough to be a hazard. However, some environmentalists say even tiny amounts of PCBs can cause harm. Unleashed in the environment, the chemicals gradually accumulate in the fat of fish and animals and then move up the food chain to people. People who are exposed to too much can develop cancer.

EPA measurements of airborne PCBs within the 16-acre trade

center site and from the surrounding area have so far been below exposure levels shown to cause cancer in animals. A Sept. 14 test of rain water showed slightly higher than normal PCBs.

In addition to air monitoring, EPA has tested dust for PCBs on surfaces at two sites. Eight samples have been taken from nearby Stuyvesant High School and Manhattan Community College. None showed PCB contamination.

EPA has not done soil tests for PCBs.

David Higby of Environmental Advocates, a New York State environmental group, thinks that it should. "At some point," he said, "those PCBs are going to come to rest in soil."

The EPA also has not run tests for sulfuric acid and sulfur hexafluoride. The substations contained about 338 gallons of sulfuric acid and 350 pounds of sulfur hexafluoride, according to the utility.

The agency did recover two intact 9-by-52-inch cylinders labeled sulfur hexafluoride. However, neither the EPA nor Con Ed was able to say if that accounts for all of the chemical that had been at the site. Sulfur hexafluoride is suspected of causing neurological problems in humans, according to the environmental nonprofit, Environmental Defense.

On the Net: Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov
Environmental Defense: www.environmentaldefense.org

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