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The Daily News

THE AFTERMATH

Thursday, 5/9/02

EPA vows housing cleanup

By GREG GITTRICH
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Bowing to angry tenants and homeowners near Ground Zero, the Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday it would test and clean apartments potentially tainted with asbestos from the destruction of the World Trade Center.

The federal agency's decision to clean as many as 15,000 apartments south of Canal St. represents a dramatic flip-flop in policy.

The agency had argued that landlords and homeowners were responsible for the task.

Despite the about-face, the EPA and city environmental officials maintained yesterday that no health emergency exists. They said the sweeping new program is being carried out largely to ease fears of those who live near Ground Zero.

"While the scientific data about any immediate health risks from indoor air is very reassuring, people should not have to live with uncertainty about their futures," said Jane Kenny, EPA regional administrator. "There is no emergency here."

However, at the same news conference, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan) said, "Lots of scientific data supports that there are real problems."

'Going to deal with it'

"The important thing is we are going to deal with it now," said Nadler, who had battled, along with Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), to force the EPA to clean homes near the disaster site.

By June 1, people concerned that their homes are tainted with asbestos will be able to call a hotline and get city-certified contractors to test and clean their apartments.

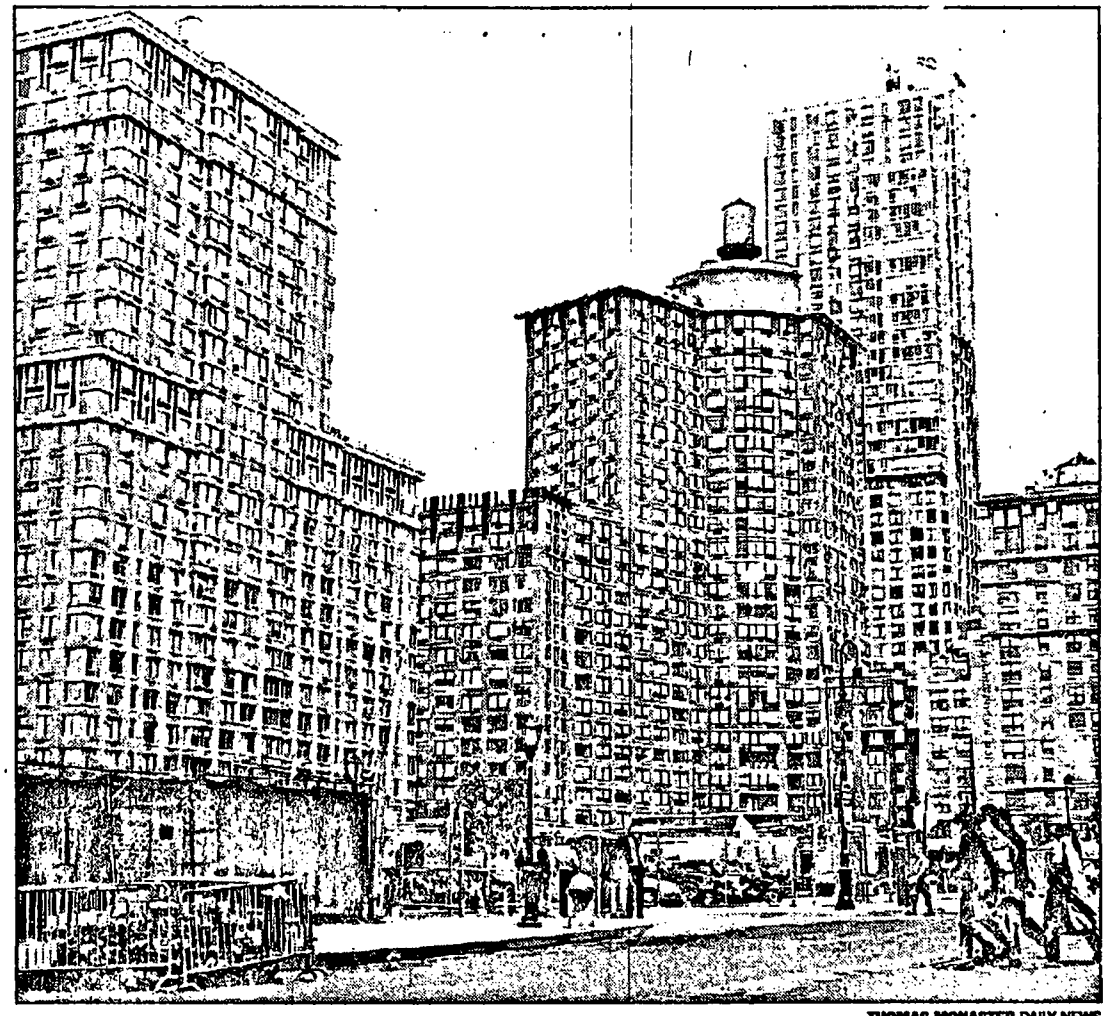
Testing will be conducted after — not before — an apartment is cleaned. Officials said the cleaning should remove other contaminants, such as lead and mercury, released into the air when the towers collapsed after they were attacked by terrorists Sept 11. But the program will test only for asbestos.

Nadler argued that the cleaning should be done building by building — not unit by unit — to avoid "a threat of recontamination."

Inhaling asbestos can cause chronic lung disease and cancer. The fiber was used as fireproofing in at least 37 floors of the south tower.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is picking up the tab for the program, which does not include nonresidential spaces such as schools.

Professional cleaning costs about $1.50 per square foot. But the tab can quadruple if asbestos is detected.



THOMAS MONASTER DAILY NEWS

CLEANUP TARGET Approximately 15,000 apartments south of Canal St., including buildings near North End Ave., will be cleaned and tested for asbestos by the Environmental Protection Agency.

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A crusader cheers feds' decision

Eight months ago, environmental lawyer Joel Kupferman was one of the few voices challenging the federal Environmental Protection Agency's assurances there was no health threat to the public from pollutants released by the World Trade Center collapse.

Kupferman, who has operated his tiny New York Environmental Law and Justice Project on a shoestring budget for years, could often be found in his second-floor office across from the EPA's building, working late into the night as he compiled hundreds of complaints from tenants, homeowners and office workers about the air quality in their buildings.

When he wasn't writing down complaints and fighting with landlords, he was filing Freedom of Information requests to various government agencies to obtain hundreds of pages of environmental test data.

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So yesterday, when the EPA did an about-face and finally announced the federal government would clean up some 15,000 residential apartments below Canal St., Kupferman was sitting upfront in the audience at the jammed press conference. He wore a stylish new gray pinstripe suit for the occasion — and a big smile across his face.

"The EPA cleanup is long due," said Mayor Bloomberg. "It is better to err on the side of caution."

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), who represents the area, got most of the press attention. Of all the politicians in this town, Nadler has fought the hardest to get EPA to assume responsibility for indoor cleanup. In the days after Sept. 11, the EPA and the Giuliani administration divided the cleanup tasks. The city agreed to monitor the quality of indoor air, and the federal government would be in charge of the outdoor air problems.

But officials at the city's Department of Environmental Protection have since admitted that they relied on individual building owners to test and clean up their own properties and did only sporadic monitoring. The fact is that monitoring 15,000 apartments and hundreds of commercial buildings below Canal St. was too huge a task for the DEP.

Nadler has been insisting for months that under the federal National Contingency Plan, the EPA must be the lead agency for cleaning up any releases of hazardous materials. By announcing that the Federal Emergency Management Agency would pay for cleaning up all apartments below Canal St. and that the EPA would supervise the effort, the agency finally gave Nadler his due.

This does not mean there is any "immediate" health danger from pollution, said EPA regional administrator Jane Kenny — something the agency has been saying from the beginning. But to ease worries about long-range health effects, the government is now prepared to do a complete cleanup. The EPA cleanup, however, is only for individual apartments, not for hundreds of office buildings. And it is not clear that the common spaces of any residential building will be cleaned, unless all the tenants request it together.

Asbestos primary concern

The cleanup will center on asbestos. So far, there are no plans to test buildings for other contaminants, such as mercury, lead or dioxin.

"We applaud the fact EPA is finally accepting responsibility," Kupferman said. "But we want to be sure they eliminate all pollution, and I'm not sure this will."

According to Uday Singh, an industrial hygienist, for instance, conventional methods for cleaning up asbestos will not necessarily remove mercury contamination. "It is practically impossible to remove mercury unless you use a HEPA filter machine fitted with an activated charcoal filter," Singh said.

Much remains to be answered about this new cleanup effort. But after months of being dismissed as a kook, Kupferman and the people he helped could say they were finally heard.

E-mail: jgonzalez@edit.nydailynews.com

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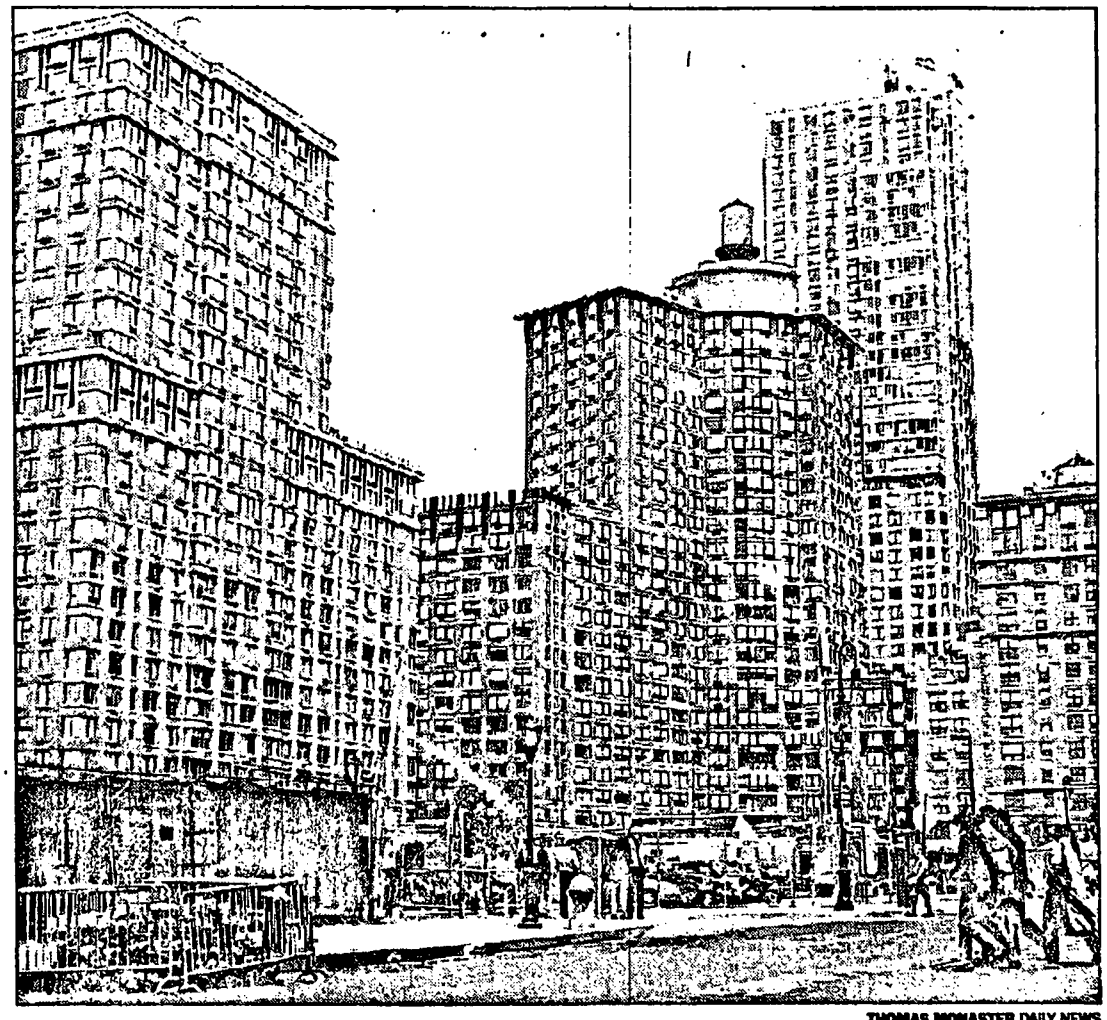

THOMAS MONASTER DAILY NEWS

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DEP Schedule for the LMAQ Hotline for the Week of May 13, 2002 – May 17, 2002 11:00a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

5/13 Monday	5/14 Tuesday	5/15 Wednesday	5/16 Thursday	5/17 Friday
Rose	Bruce	Bruce	~~Rose~~ Karen	~~Karen~~ Rose
Tiehesia	_____	Tiehesia	_____	Tiehesia

IN QUEENS OFFICE

Bruce	Rose	Rose (Bx.)	Rose ~~Karen~~	Karen ~~Rose~~
Karen	Karen (EEO)	Karen (Bx.)	Bruce	Bruce
Nicole	Tiehesia	Nicole	Tiehesia	Nicole

Karen – one day at the Hotline; Four days in Queens.

5/7/02

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