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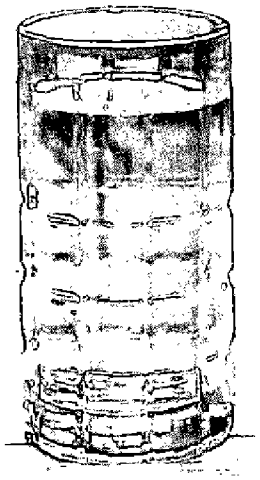
SOUTHERN QUEENS

Residents Wary of the Water, But the City Says Drink Up

There is water everywhere in the sand and gravel aquifer under southeastern Queens. But which of its drops are fit to drink?

That is the question that the city and local residents are grappling with almost two decades after the area's groundwater was found to be contaminated and removed from the local drinking supply. The reason is that the city wants to send the water — after cleaning it — back through local spigots.

Charles Sturcken, chief of staff for the city's Department of Environmental Protection, said that tapping the area's groundwater would add stability to the city's water supply. It would also reduce flooding in southeastern Queens, which he said is a growing problem because groundwater collects beneath the surface, leaving little room to absorb rainwater.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

But civic groups and residents are wary, saying that toxic sites that polluted the goundwater in the first place have not been cleaned up.

"The community is against it," said Manuel Caughman, president of the Brinkerhoff Action Association, a civic group. He was one of dozens of residents who questioned officials about the plan at a recent meeting.

Most expressed concern about an industrial site at 107-10 180th Street in Jamaica. The site is now used as a private school bus depot. But it once was the location of a factory that processed perchloroethylene, a toxic chemical used by dry cleaners.

In the early 1980's, government regulators found that the chemical had saturated the ground at the 4.5-acre site, in some places down to 60 feet. Local groundwater was tainted as a result, so the city sealed several nearby wells. Until then, local water had been added to the drinking supply, most of which comes from upstate reservoirs.

Mr. Sturcken said his department had proposed to clean those wells and steer their water through a new filtration system that it planned to add to a water station at 164th Place and 110th Avenue in Jamaica.

But first, the State Department of Environmental Conservation would have to remove the pollutants at the 180th Street site. Jennifer Meicht, a spokeswoman for the department, said it planned to install pipes at the site to extract chemical vapors in the ground above the water table. Then workers would use pipes reaching deep underground to inject chemicals to kill the high concentration of perchloroethylene trapped there. The department plans to begin the work in early 2003.

But there is skepticism whether such measures would render the local water pure enough to drink.

"The community is definitely reluctant to accept this in theory," Mr. Caughman said. "It would have to be proved."

He conceded that local flooding had become a serious problem.

"There is flooding at I.S. 8 on 164th Street and flooding at the Carter House, a senior citizens home on Linden Boulevard," he said. "It may even threaten the subway stations on Parsons Boulevard."

JIM O'GRADY

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