

## Students worried about polluted school

### School

Rochester Prep classes held above chemical spill

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Scores of students from Rochester Prep High School left class Tuesday morning and marched in the rain to Rochester City School District headquarters in response to longstanding environmental concerns regarding their subleased building at 690 St. Paul Street.

The building stands on a former Bausch + Lomb manufacturing site that was designated a brownfield in 2009 due to the presence of trichloroethylene (TCE), a carcinogenic chemical solvent that leaked from underground storage tanks.

Separately, Monroe County employees who work in the building across St. Paul from the structure that houses the school were informed in recent weeks that the TCE spill has migrated under the street and is impacting their work space as well.

The school district held a meeting with an array of stakeholders in November at which the state departments of Environmental Conservation and of Health both said the air and water are safe.

“Right now they’ve said their interventions are working and they were very reassuring to the staff and families who were there,” RCSD Director of Operations Michael Schmidt said.

The students marching in the rain Tuesday were far from reassured. They demanded a new building for Rochester Prep High School, which sub-leases the second and third floors from RCSD.

“I want the City School District to fix the water and the air, because if this was in Penfield, Brighton, any area in the (suburbs), it wouldn’t be like this for this many years,” Rochester Prep student Jahsih Burgess said.

“I’m not going to be put at risk like that,” 10th-grader Safia Abdulla said. “I come for my education; I don’t come for cancer.”

of corrective actions at 690 St. Paul, including installing sub-slab ventilation and covering the polluted land in new topsoil.

Officials had concluded that the building was safe for continued use, and that TCE levels in the building’s interior air were below unsafe levels.

“Indoor air at 690 St. Paul has been tested at least once a year since 2008, and the TCE results are consistently below the state guideline and do not represent an immediate exposure concern for the students or staff,” the DEC told the *Democrat and Chronicle* Tuesday.

In a statement, Rochester Prep officials said they had reviewed “all of the available environmental reports” before moving into the building and satisfied themselves the structure was “safe and within the requirements of the law.

“We are working to engage with our staff, students and their families to share the information we have that underlies our confidence in the building’s safety and to hear and recognize their questions and concerns,” the statement said.

In April, though, monitoring showed unacceptable levels of TCE in two

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**Shyhiem Rodriguez and Regina Harper lead fellow Rochester Prep High School students in chants outside the Rochester City School District office on Broad Street. They say the school district knowingly rented a building with toxins to their charter school.**  
TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mayor Lovely Warren weighed in Tuesday night, urging the district and the charter school to find alternate space immediately.

City spokeswoman Jessica Alaimo said: “(The mayor’s) position is that there are environmental concerns held by students, parents and teachers. Given that students can’t focus on learning and their parents don’t want to send them to school and teachers can’t focus on instruction, it makes sense to seek another location.”

Over the last eight years, state and local authorities have undertaken a series

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locations. Subsequent tests showed it was the result of misguided off-gassing into a treatment system room on site, according to a letter sent to tenants in August by the building owner, Genesee Valley Real Estate.

In May, engineers temporarily shut down that groundwater treatment system, flushed it with water and installed new ventilation onto the roof. It tested again in June and found the TCE levels were back to customary levels, below the state threshold, the letter said.

About the same time the letter was sent to the tenants at 690 St. Paul, the DEC, which is overseeing environmental remediation at the building, informed the county that sampling had found TCE vapors inside 691 St. Paul the previous spring.

The building at 691 St. Paul, which primarily houses county human services offices, also is owned by Genesee Valley Real Estate.

“The state DEC gave us formal notification that yes, they had reason to believe the contamination plume was migrating underground from 690 to 691. They offered to come in and do some air and soil testing to confirm that, which they did,” county spokesman Jesse Sleezer said.

Information on the DEC’s website indicates that two separate plumes of TCE are moving through

A special ventilation system to collect chemical vapors from under the building’s foundation before they can infiltrate the structure is being hurriedly installed now, according to the DEC.

The results of their sampling plus that done by the DEC showed the TCE concentrations were far below indoor air guidelines adopted by a unit of the state Department of Labor that oversees public-employee workplace safety.

Most of the 19 samples collected by the county also were below the much more stringent guideline set by the state Department of Health guideline, though a half-dozen readings were slightly higher than that guideline limit.

RCSD has a 15-year, \$15 million lease of the building that expires in 2023. It houses All City High, for students who are behind on credits, and the Youth and Justice Program, as well as some office space and records storage.

Rochester Prep has about 300 students in the building but will grow out eventually to about 800 students.

It will need more space for that and already has been searching for a new site.

Shirley Richardson has a granddaughter at Rochester Prep and said she wants the students taken out of the building immediately.

“These are some extremely intelligent kids out here in the rain trying to get the word out,” she said. “I don’t want them in there another day.”

groundwater from east to west, with at least one of them impacting the building leased by the county.

County employees were told at a series of meetings last week that trace amounts of TCE have been found in 691 St. Paul's indoor air, though the levels are below applicable guidelines, Sleezer said.

"By and large, I think that was pretty well accepted. Obviously, there are still some concerns on the part of employees, which is understandable," Sleezer said. "The county's only priority was to make sure their health and safety was being protected."

Also Monday, students said the drinking water is coming out of the taps discolored. That is a separate issue from the TCE — as in other buildings in Rochester, the water at 690 St. Paul St. comes from Canadice and Hemlock lakes through the city water supply.

The district tested all the drinking water sources in the building Nov. 20 and is waiting for the results, Schmidt said.

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