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A mission to cover up the (lightly) radioactive legacy of Ridgewood



BY LAUREN KIRCHNER

9:27 am Nov. 14, 2012

Even as the city recovers from the hurricane, another, wholly unrelated cleanup is quietly underway in one corner of Queens.

The Environmental Protection Agency is working to reduce trace amounts of radiation on a certain block in Ridgewood—1125 to 1139 Irving Avenue, near the edge of Knollwood Park Cemetery.

Now home to a deli, an auto body shop, and a construction company, this block was the site of the Wolff Alport Chemical Corporation from the 1920s to 1954, according to [a notice on the EPA website](#).

Some of the minerals that Wolff Alport processed and sold contained thorium, a natural radioactive substance that can be harmful to humans in concentrated amounts. One of Wolff Alport's clients, according to another [report](#), was the Manhattan Project.

Unfortunately for Ridgewood residents, the radioactive waste from that fateful project, among others, has never gone away. For several years in the 1940s, Wolff Alport chemists dumped the concentrated



Site in Ridgewood.

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thorium byproduct from the processed minerals into the city sewers. Tests of the area [in the past several years](#) have found contamination in and around the sewers, in the cement foundation of the buildings, and coming from the soil underneath the sidewalks on Irving Avenue and in the yard behind the building.

In fact, when Wolff Alport employees were dumping radioactive waste into the city sewers in the 1940s, they weren't breaking any laws, because no such laws existed at the time. They were simply following industry protocol, said Karam. According to the [EPA](#), the federal government only told the company to stop disposing of its waste in the sewer in 1947. That was the same year that Wolff Alport sold off all of its remaining thorium to the government "for military uses." The company went out of business in 1954.

The October 17 meeting of Brooklyn's Community Board 4 in nearby Bushwick began with a presentation by several representatives from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the EPA two of the city, state, and federal agencies that are partnering to address the site. Dr. Andy Karam, a health physicist and radiation expert working for the City, assured his audience that the health risks posed by the radiation is incredibly low.

Radiation is part of our natural environment, Karam explained; we all get about one mrem of natural radiation every day on average. We might also get another one mrem per day from artificial sources. (A chest X-Ray, by comparison, would give you 10 mrem, and a CT scan 1,000 mrem). The radiation that has been measured at the Wolff Alport site ranges from 0.1 mrem to 0.3 mrem.

"To put that number in context, it takes about 100,000 mrem to give us enough radiation to make us sick," said Karam. "As a scientist, I think it's very safe to say that nobody's going to get radiation sickness from Wolff Alport. There's just not enough radiation there for that to happen, so there's no short-term risk."

That said, the goal of the project is to reduce long-term exposure for people who work on the site every day, or for people who live nearby who might use the sidewalk out front every day.

Mike Ferriola, an on-scene coordinator from the EPA working on the project, described a course of action in which he and his colleagues would first do a pilot study, laying down different types of shielding elements like concrete and steel on the ground, and taking measurements to determine which material will reduce the radiation to the lowest level.

Both I.S. 384 and the Audrey Johnson Day Care center are within two blocks of the site, but the EPA representatives said at the meeting that readings taken throughout those buildings for radiation and radon gas had shown normal levels.

Toward the end of the group's presentation, a board member asked what had prompted "everybody [to] come out now and start to do something after all these years?"

Karam assured her that there had been no change in the radiation at the site itself, and that there hadn't been any negative health effects reported. The radiation detected in the area has been the same for decades, he said. Although the EPA is only just acting on the site now, the New York City Department of

Environmental Protection has been taking readings of the site since the late 1980s, when the city first became aware of its troubled past.

"The site itself hasn't changed, but the regulations have," said Karam. "And that causes us to go back and look at it again."

EPA press officer Elias Rodriguez, in response to some questions, wrote in an email that "this action is being taken as a result of the State's request for help," a request which only came in August of this year. He also wrote that an exact budget has not yet been set for this project, but that "\$320,000 has been authorized as a starting point."

On a recent Friday, a few days before Sandy hit, Hector Rodriguez (no relation to Elias), a mechanic working at Primo Autobody Repair & Sales, which is on the affected block in Ridgewood, confirmed that the DEP has been visiting the shop and conducting surveys periodically for the past several years. On Wednesday, he said, several DEP and EPA coordinators were out in front taking readings on the sidewalk.

Rodriguez said he has been working at Primo for 13 years. When asked whether he was concerned about what he had learned about radiation there, he smiled and shrugged, and said he was not sure what to think.

"They say they are going to fix it, though," said Rodriguez.

Workers at the nearby Jarabacoa Deli & Grocery were aware of the situation, but they declined to comment.

That same afternoon, I found Eric Daly, another on-scene coordinator for the EPA, with a few colleagues outside an empty lot at the end of the block where elevated levels of radiation have also been detected. Another lot extends to behind the buildings on the block, and contains a railroad spur that once came off of a Long Island Railroad line but has long since become overgrown with grass. The whole area next to and behind the buildings appeared to be full of discarded lumber, empty bottles, and several abandoned cars and boats covered with graffiti.

Daly said that the logistical difficulty of determining the ownership of the lot had slowed his team down slightly; property deeds seem to have been lost to time, and no one has paid any taxes on the land to the city since 2006. Once he gets the go-ahead from the EPA, Daly said, he and his team will most likely cover parts of the ground with patches of cement, and fence the lot off completely to prevent pedestrians from short-cutting through it.

Daly explained that it was safer and more efficient to shield people from the contaminated soil than to dig up the soil and then have to dispose of it elsewhere. That is why they call the project a "response action" rather than a "cleanup."

The team of coordinators also hopes to soon get access from all of the business owners and property owners to put up extra shielding throughout those buildings, even if it means that they'll have to shut

down business or temporarily relocate while that work is being done. The federal government will pay for the entire process.

“A lot of times, we can’t find people that caused these problems, it’s usually like, it happened in the 50s 60s, or before, and before people who were conscious of what they were doing to the environment, or just didn’t care, and those people are long gone,” said Daly. He gestured toward the storefronts on the block. “It’s unfortunate. These business owners are innocent of this, they bought the property, and they didn’t cause this problem.”

When I reached out to the EPA press officer Elias Rodriguez a few days after Hurricane Sandy, he wrote that, despite the agency’s continuing hurricane response, “Our Wolff Alport project people remain on the job and field work, meetings, etc. remain ongoing.”

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