

Cleanup at Honeywell site gets final approvals

Star-Ledger, The (Newark, NJ)

March 25, 2007

Author: NAWAL QAROONI; STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The long-awaited cleanup of the 18.2-acre former industrial property owned by Honeywell International in Highland Park is expected to begin next month after receiving final approvals from the county and borough, officials said.

"We have wanted this Honeywell site cleaned up for years," said borough Mayor Meryl Frank. "We are committed to getting all 20 known contaminated sites in Highland Park cleaned up, whether they're residential or commercial."

A meeting with borough officials and the Edison Wetlands Association is scheduled for tomorrow at 7 p.m. in the borough senior center on South Sixth Avenue. Officials plan to discuss how the property will be cleaned and all residents are welcome to attend.

The property is owned by Morristown-based Honeywell International, an industrial company boasting 120,000 employees worldwide. The site, widely known as Midland-Ross after the oven manufacturer that previously owned it, is mostly vacant with a few warehouses still on the property.

The land is heavily laden with metals such as lead, and hydrocarbons that include coal, tar and asphalt, according to Michael Rosenberg, chair of the borough environmental commission. There was also groundwater contamination, but Rosenberg said those portions have already been cleaned.

Midland-Ross shut down in 1984. Honeywell acquired a successor to Midland Ross, called Grimes Aerospace in 1997, said spokeswoman Victoria Streitfeld.

"So we maintained the environmental liabilities," Streitfeld said.

A letter from Honeywell stating that the contamination cleanup would begin tomorrow was mistakenly sent out to area residents last week, Streitfeld said.

But removing 20,000 cubic yards of excavated soil over six months is actually expected to begin by early April, Streitfeld said. About 100 trucks are expected to haul out the dirty soil daily.

"We are prepared to begin cleanup as soon as we get the necessary approvals from the county and borough," Streitfeld said. "We expect that remediation will be successful and safe, and is in the long-term best interest of the community."

Bob Spiegel, executive director of the Edison Wetlands Association, said he and an environmental engineer plan to attend tomorrow's meeting to describe what the public needs to understand about health risks.

"The site has got soil issues," Spiegel said. "Are the levels screaming? They're moderate and certainly cause for concern."

Spiegel said the contaminated soil would actually be removed, and not just capped.

"That's what we always want, for the soil to be carted off," Spiegel said. "You don't just want the land capped, because you're leaving problems for future generations."

The cleanup is being done by Honeywell, but efforts must ultimately meet state standards of the Department of Environmental Protection.

"We have requested the cleanup plan but have not seen it yet," said Lawrence Hajna, a DEP spokesman. "State law gives them the option to do this, but they do so at their own risk."

Hajna said Honeywell proposed excavating soils from four areas of environmental concern, including a paint spray booth and historic fill area, a backfill and PCB area, a drainage pipe area and a metallic sludge area. Honeywell's consultant, MACTEC Inc., has informed the DEP that excavated soil would not be removed through residential neighborhoods, Hajna said.

David Papi, director of the Middlesex County health department, said it is important to monitor how dust from the digging would be controlled.

"Two of the listed issues with the site are carcinogens, so there are certain elements of remediation that have to be closely contained," Papi said, adding that the county would provide oversight throughout the remediation process.

Streitfeld said Honeywell would establish an air-monitoring system for the cleanup, post results at the construction site, and use an existing entrance to the property off River Road to avoid local residential streets. The trucks would be covered before leaving the site and would be inspected to ensure they are clean, Streitfeld said.

"Honeywell will implement strict dust control measures to fully protect the health and safety of the workers on the site and the neighbors around it," Streitfeld said.

But residents in the area say they're still alarmed.

"There is some cause for concern," said Donna Naranjo, who has lived on Cleveland Avenue for 10 years. "There could be lead on the site and you always hear about lead causing neurological damage."

Rosenberg acknowledged that the cleanup would disturb residents.

"We're just glad they're disposing the soil outside of Highland Park," Rosenberg said. "People are concerned as they should be. It will be noisy and disruptive, but hopefully it'll be done quickly."

The land could be made into open space after the cleanup is finished, Frank said, though future use for the site remains undecided.

Caption: MAP: Contaminated industrial site at Honeywell site