Tests show no contamination on ground, upper floors

City, county offices to re-open

By CARL ROBERTS

Binghamton City Hall will be open today, and the Broome County Office Building will reopen tomorrow as new test results released last night show no contamination on the ground floors and upper floors of either building.

However, government plaza officials are urging employees to take public transportation as the parking areas in the basement and subbasement will be closed.

The State Office Building, the third building affected by last week's transformer explosion, will remain closed at least until Friday as workers clean up chemically-contaminated dust deposited throughout the 18-story building.

The dust contains PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, which have been linked with cancer, liver disease and skin problems.

"The city and county have the same level of PCBs in any building which contains fluorescent lights. It's all within normal limits," said Dr. Arnold J. Schaefer, Broome County's health commissioner.

"Also, the type of PCBs found are not the kind you usually find in a transformer, indicating they are coming from fluorescent lights," Schaefer said.

The tests, both air and "wipe" samples of surfaces, were taken between 9 p.m. Saturday and 4 a.m. Sunday from three areas in the county building and five areas in City Hall. The tests were done by both the state and a private firm in Syracuse.

Air sample results from the city and county office buildings showed there were between 20 and 27 micrograms per cubic meter of PCBs, far less than even the most stringent of state and federal guidelines.

Schaefer said the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health recommends that there be less than 1 microgram per cubic meter of PCBs and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) legally sets limits at 500 to 1,000 PCBs per microgram, depending on the type of PCB.

Officials, however, did find small amounts of contamination in the basement which links all three buildings of the complex. Those levels ranged from .3 to .48 micrograms per square meter.

"There was some there," said David R. Seiffert of the state Office of General Services, who is supervising the cleanup and repair of the buildings. "But remember that policemen and firemen were tramping through there. They were probably the only source." Uniforms left in the basement by firemen will be decontaminated.

Seiffert said contamination levels taken from mechanical equipment near the explosion of the state building showed contamination of 16 micrograms per centimeter. Four elevator lobbies were also tested, areas which showed less contamination.

Air samples of the state office building completed by both the state and a private firm also show a higher presence of contamination in the air, but at levels still within federal guidelines.

"It looks like a dirty house," said Seiffert, who has toured some of upper levels of the state office building with James E. Wahl, the state office building superintendent. Wahl described the inside of the building as "just having dust on everything."

Seiffert said the state would negotiate with disposal contractors today who can be expected to haul away at least 30 55-gallon drums of waste.

Meanwhile, two crews from Middel Electric Co., working around the clock, have made temporary electrical connections and heat has been restored to the state office building, Seiffert said. The crews are now working on more permanent connections.

Officials are unable to estimate either the total damage to the state building or the cost of cleanup.

All food will be thrown out from the cafeteria. Thousands of pages of paper left on desks may have to be copied and thrown out, as well. Drapes, chairs and rugs can be vacuumed. Computer relay systems can also be wiped clean.

And in the meantime, about 725 employees from 35 agencies will need to find a temporary working home.

A few may be using the fourth floor of City Hall, said Mayor Alfred J. Libous, who will confer with government plaza officials today about temporary arrangements. He said those arrangements should be announced at a 2 p.m. press conference today.

Otherwise, Libous said bosses would be back to nearly normal for most of his 120 city employees.

"Everything is far below OSHA, even the state office building which is very conducting," he said.

Today is a holiday for county employees, though County Clerk Richard Kopko said the clerk's office will be open for the filing and recording of papers.



Clinical workers in protective gear leave the sub-basement of the

Workers willing, if not eager, to return to jobs in building

By ANDY COHEN

Contamination of one's office by toxic chemicals might be enough to make even brave workers reluctant to return to the job, but most state office employees interviewed yesterday — including a few who admit to being hooked on the adventure, thrills and danger — longed to be the workers "inside."

"I'm sooner the better," said James E. Connors, a regional director in the Department of Transportation. "I'm sure it'll be all right."

Connors said he is eager meanwhile to set up some kind of temporary office as an information center, even if it contains merely at a few phones.

Does Connors feel he'll be safe if going back to a building now strewn with ash that contains highly toxic PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls?

Certainly, Connors said.

Evelyn Friends, a stenographer in the Department of Law, is every bit as willing to return to her office.

"If they say it's safe, I'll take their word for it," she said.

Friends, a fire marshall on the state building's 17th floor, said she was more worried by what could have happened than what will happen from now on. She feels lucky, she said, that the fire occurred at so early a time of day (6:30 a.m.) that most workers were still at home.

But while Friends isn't worried about her personal safety, she does have concerns about materials left in the office. A great deal of paperwork was left in the open, and whether that paper will have to be destroyed is still undetermined. But Friends said many of the papers in her office are undoubtedly and not easily replaceable.

"You're going to be out of luck," said Friends. "Any office paperwork has to be destroyed."

And while Connors and Friends' view was representative of most workers interviewed, not everyone is eager to re-enter the state building. Tom Wiggs, executive assistant to Assemblyman James McCabe, is one employee worried about going back.

"It's kind of scary to go back and consider whether the next you sit in will affect you in years from now," Wiggs said.

Wiggs felt behind a number of things that might never be reclaimed: his eyeglasses, a calculator, his notes and irreplaceable correspondence — and a 20-year-old dictionary he's used in every job he ever had.

"I'll throw it out," said Wiggs.

"From what I understand," he said, "it's the heat, concrete workers they'll be able to clean, but there is some question about how effectively they'll be able to clean soft surfaces."

Helen Woodland, McCabe's legislative assistant, said she and other workers will have to rely on the responsibility vested about the safety of [illegible]

"When we do go back," she [illegible] going to be a different looking

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