State may leave some PCBs

By LOIS FECTEAU

State officials may not clean hidden spaces of the Binghamton State Office Building even though they are known to contain traces of a toxic chemical.

Cleanup supervisor David K. Seiffert said the state health department will have to decide whether the building's false ceilings, light fixtures and other so-called hidden spaces need to be decontaminated of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

"The state health department is working on this. Axelrod (state Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod) has stated at least once he's not sure the hidden spaces will have to be cleaned. That's why we have a team on site to take tests," said Seiffert, an engineer with the state Office of General Services.

The 18-story building has been closed since Feb. 5 when a fire and explosion in a basement transformer blasted 180 gallons of PCB coolant throughout the room and contaminated the building with PCB-laden fumes and ash. Officials say the cleanup and repair of the building will take months and cost at least a million dollars.

Yesterday, toxic waste specialists from New England Pollution Control Co. Inc. completed a surface cleanup of three floors.

Seiffert said the building is being cleaned from the top and floors 17, 16 and 15 now are in "clean condition" even though the team did not clean any hidden spaces or inside desks or files. The 18th floor is being cleaned later because of carpeting.

"Exposed surfaces are all we're talking about," Seiffert said.

The state health department is testing to see whether those floors have been effectively decontaminated. If the hidden spaces do not have to be cleaned, Seiffert said the building could be cleaned in a month or two.

"But that does not mean it would be occupiable," Seiffert said.

Seiffert said he did not know how long the cleanup would take or what it would involve if the hidden spaces have to be cleaned.

"There are hidden spaces and there are hidden spaces ... I seriously doubt OGS would want to leave a building closed for more than a year. It's a financial consideration," Seiffert said.

Seiffert repeated that it would be up to the health department to certify when the building is safe.

"I personally don't feel we're dealing with a high enough level (of PCBs) to be concerned about, but I can't make good medical judgments, I'm an engineer. Obviously, we will make the area just as reasonably clean as we can," Seiffert said.

Rather than clean the hidden spaces, Axelrod said the state health department may recommend filters for some areas.

For example, Axelrod said it will be impossible to clean the space between the ceiling and the floor above.

"There's no reason, really, if the material is in there why it couldn't be contained by filters," Axelrod said.

Venting the building will be another way to approach the hidden spaces, Axelrod said.

Officials are working with the state Department of Environmental Conservation to see how low levels of PCBs will have to be before they can be released into the air.

Axelrod admits it will be technically impossible to test every nook of the building to see whether it is safe.

"There are difficulties to be faced. What can be left residually in the corner of a desk or in someone's file? What kinds of risks do these pose? We have to wait to get one floor clean, and then we'll test," Axelrod said.

Axelrod said the state will conduct a cleanup to assure people the building is safe when the cleanup is finished.

Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, Broome County health commissioner, has called for an independent evaluation of the cleanup. Schecter said environmental authorities in federal agencies and medical schools could do this.

"We are recommending a panel of outside experts in PCBs go through and make an evaluation so there can be no question of one government agency whitewashing the acts of another," Schecter said.

Axelrod said the state has no plans for an independent evaluation.

"The county may wish to spend some of its own money," Axelrod said. He added, "Probably, any standard we set will be more stringent than any outside criteria."

James E. Lee, administrative assistant to Broome County Executive Carl S. Young, said no decision has been made about an independent evaluation. Lee said county officials hope to meet soon in Albany with state officials to discuss the cleanup.

Meanwhile, James E. Wahl, state building superintendent, said officials probably would decide within two weeks about moving the 725 dislocated state employees into more permanent quarters.

Wahl said the vacant K mart store at 33 W. State St. in the Binghamton Plaza was looking like the most practical location because of available floor space and parking. Wahl said he was not authorized to reveal information about a lease arrangement.

Yesterday, the state building which has been running on "giant extension cords" from the county building, was hooked up to its own electrical system, Seiffert said. The building may be disconnected from the county building by Sunday.

In a related matter, officials from The Fairbanks Co., 10 Glenwood Ave., Binghamton, would not comment today about whether the coolant in the transformer which exploded Tuesday night contained PCBs. James Hansen, company president, said yesterday a sample of the oil from the rooftop transformer is being analyzed.

Binghamton Fire Marshal Steven Seder said he planned to contact Fairbanks officials later today about the analysis.

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