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Stern blasts Thompson on waste clean-up

By Thomas Schilling

GRACE MARY STERN, Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, said Thursday that the delay in the clean-up of Waukegan Harbor was a prime example of Gov. James Thompson's "leaky" record on cleaning up toxic waste dumps.

Calling the harbor a "potential Love Canal," Stern charged that Thompson has stalled the clean-up by refusing to commit state funds to the project. Her comments were made in a press conference on a Waukegan Harbor pier.

"It has been six years since the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency discovered that Waukegan Harbor was the home of one of the larger unlicensed PCB dumps in the country," said Stern, Lake County clerk. PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is a toxic waste that scientists believe could cause cancer in human beings.

"The PCB is still here today because of the inaction of the one person in the best position to get the mess cleaned up: Gov. Thompson."

LATER THURSDAY, Richard J. Carlson, director of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, rebutted Stern's charges, saying the clean-up of Waukegan Harbor is "on schedule."

"It is absolutely untrue that Waukegan Harbor is a potential Love Canal," Carlson said of the Niagara Falls neighborhood evacuated because of health hazards linked to a toxic waste dump. "The PCBs are a legitimate issue, and it is fair to ask when they will be cleaned up; but the harbor does not resemble Love Canal. The PCBs are relatively stable, and we are in the process of a lawsuit with the Outboard Marine Corporation, which put the chemicals in the harbor. Both the state and the federal government are doing everything they can."

Stern spoke in front of a sign that warns fishermen not to eat the fish they catch in the harbor because the fish might be dangerous to their health. "We must move quickly to clean up the most dangerous spots, like Waukegan Harbor," she said. "Adlai Stevenson and I . . . will start the clean-up here, using whatever state funds are necessary to make sure we don't lose federal aid and further endanger the public health."

An estimated 2 million pounds of PCB are believed to have been dumped illegally in the harbor, making it the largest concentration of the toxic waste in the United States.

"The people of the Great Lakes states should not be guinea pigs," Stern said. "Waukegan Harbor has the potential to be Illinois' Love Canal."

ALTHOUGH THE harbor has been named the state's top toxic waste problem by state and federal agencies, money from the recently created federal "superfund" for clean-ups will not be forthcoming until Thompson guarantees that the state will pay for 10 percent of the costs. So far, that guarantee has not been given, and Stern charged that the inaction is indicative of Thompson's "leaky" toxic waste record.

"He has spent only $27,000 . . . although he knows of at least 32 other potentially hazardous waste dumps in the state," Stern said. "When the federal superfund first became available, Thompson didn't even bother to submit Waukegan's name."

State and federal authorities estimate that the removal of the PCBs from the harbor would cost $2 million to $4 million, according to Roger Harrison, Waukegan's environmental officer. Authorities estimate that it could cost up to $30 million more to transport the chemicals to toxic waste dumps in Alabama and Arkansas, he said.



Tribune photo by Quentin Dodd

Grace Mary Stern at Waukegan Harbor, which she called a "potential Love Canal."

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