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PCB issue a 10-year albatross

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H-T City Editor

The final chapter in the history of PCBs in the Bloomington area may have started to unfold with Tuesday's announcement of an agreement in principle between the city and Westinghouse to incinerate the pollutants in Bloomington along with other waste.

THE PCB CONTROVERSY at times overwhelmed the Bloomington community by pitting people — caught in an environmental nightmare that no one wanted — against each other.

Environmentalists fought industry, and industry felt snubbed by local government. Residents wanted answers that the scientists and federal officials could not give.

Bill Westlake, manager of Westinghouse in Bloomington, hopes the "conceptual" agreement will help put an end to the PCB story.

"This has been hanging over our heads for a long time," he said. "I have 700 employees and a product to manufacture and this has gotten in the way of that. Maybe this will put it all behind us."

It's been nearly a decade since industrial chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs were discovered to have contaminated a portion of the city's sewer lines and its south sewage treatment plant. After investigation, it was learned in the mid-1970s that the pollution was coming from the Westinghouse Corp., located off Curry Pike, west of Bloomington.

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RESIDENTS of the Bloomington area had been using sewage sludge to fertilize their gardens until the contamination was discovered.

Garden produce, milk and fish in streams were found to be contaminated. According to a National Research Council report, health officials conducted tests of Westinghouse workers, families of workers and residents, but found no correlation between levels of PCB in the body and use of the sludge — even though levels were higher than the general U.S. population.

Public hearings on the PCB pollution problem were halted in 1977 to give the City of Bloomington and Westinghouse a chance to settle their differences out of court. After years of stop and start negotiations, the city hired an experienced environmental lawyer — Joseph Karaganis of Chicago — and eventually filed a $749 million damage suit against Westinghouse in April 1981 (the suit was amended in October 1981, adding the Monsanto Chemical Co. to the suit and raising the total to $329 million).

MEANWHILE, the State of Indiana, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and members of the public continued to try to get answers from Westinghouse about the pollution.

The only producer of PCBs was Monsanto, which had plants in Anniston, Ala., where production ended in 1970, and Sauget, Ill., where production ceased in 1977.

The chemical, used in the manufacture of capacitors and insulators at Westinghouse from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, was labeled toxic by the EPA. It had been found to cause cancer in laboratory animals and was believed to have caused liver disease and skin ailments — among other things — in humans exposed to the substance.

Because of the extreme stability of the chemical and the inability of nature to break down the substance, PCBs are expected to remain in the environment for many years. High concentrations of PCBs have been found in many places, including the Great Lakes, the Saint Lawrence Seaway, the Gulf Coast, parts of the Appalachian East Coast region and in the Bloomington area.

So far, areas known to be contaminated near Bloomington include Richland and Clear creeks, Neal's Landfill in western Monroe County, Neal's dump in Owen County, Lemon Lane dump in Bloomington, the Bennett Stone Quarry northwest of Bloomington, the Monroe County Landfill, the Winston-Thomas sewage plant and city sewer lines (since cleaned)

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