Cleanup effort tested on 17th floor

By LOIS PECTEAU

Officials admit they are not sure how to proceed in the decontamination of Binghamton's State Office Building and they are learning as they go, beginning with a thorough cleaning of the 17th floor.

"Right now we are learning to walk. This has never been done before and we are working to discover what levels are safe," said Dr. David Axelrod, state health commissioner.

"There are difficulties to be faced. What can be just swept accidently in the corner of a desk? In someone's file? We don't know at this point. We have to get one floor clean and then we'll test," Axelrod said.

The 19-story state building has been closed since a fire and explosion in a basement transformer Feb. 5 blasted 300 gallons of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) coolant throughout the room and contaminated other areas of the building with PCB-laden fumes and ash. Because of the extent of the contamination, officials now say the cleanup and repair of the building will take months and will cost at least a million dollars.

To get a better idea of how long the cleanup will take, a crew of toxic-waste specialists from New England Pollution Control Co. Inc. planned to begin cleaning a single floor today.

"We want New England to do a thorough cleanup of the 17th floor. We want to get an idea of how much time it takes to get one floor into shape," said John T. Hudacs, deputy commissioner of the state Office of General Services.

When New England has completed the floor, the state health department will test to see how effective the cleanup has been.

Hudacs said the state planned to wait for the test results before making any decision about leasing more permanent quarters for the dislocated state workers, who are scattered across Binghamton.

James E. Wohl, state building superintendent, said the state is looking into six-month to one-year leases with options at several local properties.

"Decisions have to be made. Some major things still have to be faced, including the ceiling overhauls. No one is even addressing how to clean those areas yet, including me. We're not sure what to do at all," said David H. Seiffert of the state Office of General Services, who is supervising the cleanup. Officials said it may be impossible to remove all PCBs and agreed it will be technically impossible to test the entire building.

"That's exactly the problem we face. When they finish (cleaning), we will go in to determine if there any contamination remaining. If there is any and despite there's an absolute level we can't go below, then we might have to decide what precautions might have to be taken before people go back into the building," Axelrod said.

"The problem is what can you really call normal and say, 'OK, go back in' when there is no normal," said Seiffert.

Broome County Health Commissioner Dr. Arnold J. Schecter today questioned the wisdom of continuing on with only a surface cleanup that does not address the contaminated hidden areas.

"I have not called for a halt, but I wonder why we're proceeding. After the once-through we still won't know about the light ceilings, the ducts, inside files," Schecter said.

"We know the hidden areas are there. I don't think anyone intends to ignore the hidden spaces. We just want to get test results of the surface cleaning and washing to see how it works," Seiffert said.

New test results by Galson Technical Services Inc. of Syracuse also show that the garage, basement and sub-basement of the government complex appear to be contaminated, Schecter said.

"This came as a surprise to us. Because of the nature of the tests, we don't know how (serious the contamination is). I have asked the state health department to send the test teams back for more testing," Schecter said.

Schecter said he met today with Broome County Executive Carl S. Young to discuss the cleanup.

"We want to know how extensive the contamination is, including any cars that might have been down there. We want to make sure that no PCBs get out into the community, into downtown Binghamton," Schecter said.

Schecter confirmed there is a communications problem between state officials in Albany and those involved in the cleanup.

"I won't deny that. People's views before and after they have walked through the building are very different. They usually come out saying, 'I didn't understand it, the extent of it.' So far, that appears to be universal," Schecter said.

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