Tower's fate topic of Albany meeting today



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Project Engineer Edward A. Mosher, left, and Gerald D. Graney, senior supervisor of construction from the state Office of General Services, study blueprints of the State Office Building's sub-basement. While a controlled-access entrance to the building will be con-

By STEVE GEIMANN

Top state officials in Albany will map out a plan for the future makeup of Binghamton's tainted State Office Building today as officials have hunt for permanent office space for 725 displaced workers.

Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod and his staff will meet with the Office of General Services to assess health aspects of the decontamination and plan for work needed to reopen the building.

The meeting could determine whether the building remains closed for up to two years or reopens within a few months.

Costs for the unprecedented work have already exceeded $300,000 and might top $1 million before the 18-story tower is reopened, officials said yesterday.

Extensive contamination by polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — a toxic chemical known to cause cancer and liver problems — has kept the building shut for 12 days, disrupting virtually every aspect of state business in Broome County.

A new series of air and work surface tests showed toxic soot and ash penetrated false ceilings and walls, which could force some dismantling of the building.

Such work could delay the reopening up to two years and cost millions of dollars, officials said Saturday.

Sources said to accomodate workers, the state may commandeer the former K mart department store at Binghamton Plaza or the vacant Columbus School for long-term office space. A final decision will be made this week.

"It will be years before that building is reopened," said Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, Broome County health commissioner.

"It will take as long as it's going to take," said John F. Hudacs, deputy commissioner of the Office of General Services, the state agency that rents office buildings.

The office tower has been closed since Feb. 5 when an early morning electrical fire damaged a General Electric Co. transformer, spewing oil made with toxic PCBs onto the ground. The chemical mixed with soot and ash and wafted into every corner of the building, officials have said.

Since then, work crews using special vacuum cleaners have worked around the clock removing drapes, papers and other objects covered with the toxic soot. The vacuums removed about 20 to 30 percent of the dust officials said.

Axelrod, recognized as an expert in environmental toxicology, said officials today will review plans for reopening the office tower.

"We need to take stock of where we are and assess the future of the state office building," Axelrod said from his home in Albany last night.

"The real issue right now is making the place habitable," he said. "What we hope to do is get it (PCB) level that satisfies us."

Axelrod said his department is still working on recommended guidelines for PCB levels in office buildings but will not have results until midweek.

The commissioner said he is willing to lead an effort after the cleanup is completed to convince state workers the building will be safe. The state is also seeking help from outside firms and from the federal government, he said.

Office of General Services officials are waiting for more information from Axelrod before moving into the next phase of decontamination.

"A lot of decisions are in his (Axelrod's) court," said Harry Stevens Jr., director of design and construction for the Office of General Services. "I don't know what (PCB level) is acceptable."

Axelrod said he might return to Binghamton this week for a closer inspection of the building. Axelrod met with local officials the day after the mishap that closed the building.

Albany sources also said Gov. Hugh L. Carey might come to Binghamton for a personal inspection and to reassure state workers.

David K. Seiffert, the state official in charge of the cleanup, said the new tests show that major sections of the eight-year-old building, especially air ducts, ceiling tiles and floor panels, may require dismantling for decontamination.

Officials already knew the work was going to be complicated when desk drawers and file cabinets were contaminated by soot and ash laden with PCBs.

Seiffert said the work has already cost more than $300,000, mostly in charges for New England Pollution Control Co. Inc., the firm that cleaned up the damaged mechanical room.

Seiffert said the Connecticut firm billed New York for "well over" $100,000. Mishe Electric Inc. of Binghamton has charged more than $100,000, and G... Associates, which supplies the protective multi-breathing units, has received $20,000 to $40,000.