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A hard look/ Cleansing fears of PCBs with a 'cosmetic' cleanup

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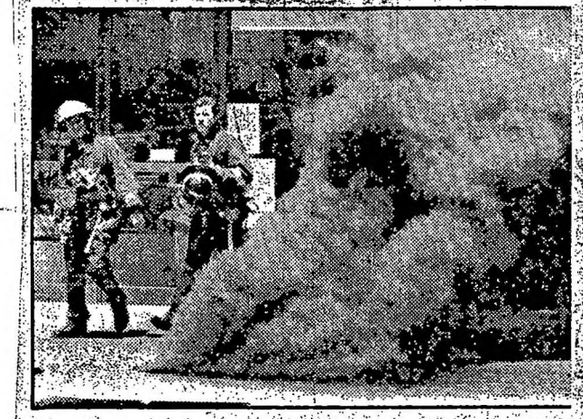

By Carol Pogash
Examiner staff writer

Soon after attorney Paul Rabin was told his offices in the Steuart Street tower of One Market Plaza were safe from PCB contamination, he noticed that the grass on his rooftop garden was turning brown.

"I thought to myself that people were lying on it," he said. Two days later he saw a sign that read "Keep Off."

Learning more about dioxins, he expedited a partnership in the making and moved to Stockton Street.

"They weren't telling us everything," he said.

Workers throughout the building have expresed fears of the unknown and fears for their health, especially women of childbearing years, since an explosion in a PG&E electrical transformer caused a fire that spewed PCBs into basement floors and the ventilation system on floors 2 through 6 of the building at the foot of Market Street three months ago.

Those floors, several restaurants and stores are still closed. They are expected to reopen in late October or November.

Because of the fears, millions of dollars are being spent for "cosmetic" cleanup to rid the people who work at One Market Plaza of their concerns. This in addition to all the money needed to rid the building of the toxic chemicals.

In fact more money probably is being spent on the psychological battle than on the chemical fight.

Daily, 400 workers garbed in Moon suits vacuum and scrub, dismantling furniture, telephones, copier, machines and vending machines and cleaning, deodorizing and reassembling them.

About 300 are cleaning floors 2 through 6, where no PCBs were

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Threatening signs about PCBs give way to muted messages

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found.

"When you're dealing with PCBs, people have perceptions of them. They don't like them," said PG&E's Tony Ledwell in what could be called an understatement.

"So far as the (San Francisco) health department is concerned, we didn't ask for any cleanup on floors 2 through 6.... That's entirely cosmetic," said San Francisco hazardous materials manager Dr. Richard Wade, a vociferous watchdog known for his outspoken criticism in earlier PCB spills.

Even though no PCB contamination was found outside the ducts, the cleanup is being conducted in order "to alleviate employee concerns," said Del Monte's Mark Gutsche, manager of corporate communications.

The floors still closed are Del Monte Corp. offices.

"Naturally people are concerned, when they read about things (they) don't understand," he said.

To allay those fears he said, "we've hired people to do extremely intensive and thorough cleaning of all our work areas.... This will be the most immaculate building in San Francisco."

Del Monte and Galbreath-Ruffin Corp., managers of the elegant building, are paying for the expensive — they won't say how much — cosmetic cleanup, although eventually, the cost may be born by PG&E.

"The whole thing undoubtedly will be settled by insurance companies and the courts," said building general manager Marty Kaswen. "It's more important to us to get the building opened up."

The PG&E cleanup in the basement has already cost $2 million and the price continues to rise, Ledwell said.

But more than money will have to be spent to allay employees' fears of PCBs.

"You feel really impotent to do anything about it," said Barbara Zeyen, who continues to work in the building's upper floors.

She said authorities "tell you it's perfectly safe, but apparently we're dealing with a toxin that no one knows about," which she said makes her skeptical of their assurances.

"It still feels eerie," said someone named Mike, who said he suspects PCBs "are still lurking around."

"They haven't cleaned the outside of the building, and the smoke hit there," he said.

Like many others who work there, he said people don't much talk about PCBs anymore.

"But you never forget it. You have to live with it," he said.

Paralegal Ann Whitehead said, "A lot of people think about it, particularly the young gals who want to have children."

She said the concern is exacerbated by fears that "no one will know what effect (PCBs) will have for seven or eight years."

"Excuse my frankness but it's the (worst)," said Ron Coleman, an employee at Franks for the Memory, a restaurant on the first floor that is open but is no longer allowed to serve patrons on the sidewalk.

He and customer Michael Borden agreed that "the building is jinxed," which is probably as succinct a way of describing what the cleanup crews are working against and why so much money is being poured in for cosmetic purposes.

Despite efforts by the county health department, PG&E, building managers and Del Monte, which periodically issue reassuring cleanup reports, talk that is part fact and part rumor persists, fueling workers' fears.

Postal workers who worked in the basement of the building were allowed to return, only to be thrown out three weeks later when they were told the facilities were not safe. Incensed, and concerned about their health, they are filing suit against PG&E, said attorney Gary Vannelli.

The federal controller of the currency left One Market Plaza and hasn't returned. Some say that's because of the PCBs.

Although government employees were never told why they did not move back to the building, Ellen Stockdale, deputy director for communications in Washington D.C., said the decision was administrative. After the fire, the office set up temporary facilities and, because of plans to move to a larger facility, officials chose to minimize disruption and not move workers twice.

To allay people's fears there are no longer any threatening signs posted in the building's expansive lobby.

Vanelli, who has or is filing half a dozen lawsuits for companies suing PG&E, said a sign that said, "Cancer causing materials. Danger. Access prohibited," disappeared in only a few days.

Muted messages now remind people that the ventilation system in the forbidden area is not operating.

Once the cleanup is completed and the closed facilities are certified as safe by Dr. Wade, merchants and building management hope people's attitudes will change.

Pharmacist Joseph Koerpel is optimistic.

His business has declined, he said, attributing the loss to the fact that floors 2 through 6 are vacant.

But he is bouyed by where the business loss is occurring — in the drugstore knick-knacks, not in the pharmacy itself, where his business has suffered no loss.

He said people still are willing to patronize his shop for their drugs.

"That's an indication to me that they still trust us," he said.

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