He wasn't serious, say legislators

Broome County's State legislators said today they think Gov. Hugh L. Carey's comments about the State Office building cannot be taken seriously. One branded them as irresponsible if they were serious.

Assemblyman James R. Tallon Jr., D-Binghamton, was at Carey's press conference yesterday, but he said he was caught by surprise when he heard the governor's comments downplaying the contamination that has closed the building.

"I think one always takes the governor serious," Tallon said. "He is given on occasion to an over statement. If taken seriously, the governor's statements were irresponsible."

Richard J. Roth, press secretary for state senate Majority Leader Warren M. Anderson, R-Binghamton, said Anderson told him this morning that Cary's remarks "were entirely too frivolous and flippant. The public who uses the building and the people who work there deserve more attention than that."

("Fortunately, the people in the state health department don't view the situation quite as casually as the governor does."

"He's got a good sense of humor, but that was misplaced humor," Assemblyman James W. McCabe Sr., D-Johnson City, said today.

Also at Cary's press conference yesterday was Dr. David Axelrod, state health commissioner, who has made many of the decisions about the Binghamton office building.

Tallon said he and Axelrod, who is a close friend of Tallon's, "merely exchanged smiles" after the governor's comments.

Roth said Anderson wants a "panel of experts to look into the matter. The state legislature will come up with whatever is needed to pay for the damage, but nobody really knows the full scope yet."

Anderson is often mentioned as a possible Republican candidate for governor in 1982. Carey is a Democrat.

Carey worried, but flippant, official says—

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Broome County Executive Carl S. Young said he could understand Carey's point about the importance of not overreacting.

"But let's not underreact either. In my opinion, it's not a cause for panic, but there's no need to be blase . . . I'm glad he's (Carey) not going to get pregnant," Young said.

Young also defended Schecter, who Carey implied has overreacted.

"Some people have complained about Dr. Schecter being too persistent. But it seems to me he's been right on target," Young said.

Yesterday, Schecter ordered a recall of files and other records allowed out of the state building against the order of health officials in the early days of the cleanup.

Schecter said he learned yesterday that a few state agencies had been allowed to remove some items from safes.

"Our assumption is this happened before people realized the seriousness of this and it is very, very distressing to me," Schecter said.

Schecter said areas where the items had been taken would be cleaned, and the people exposed to them would be added to the medical surveillance program.

Cleanup at the state building was halted indefinitely last week after officials learned the building also is contaminated with dioxin and dibenzofurans, in addition to the PCBs. These chemicals are combustion by-products of PCBs and are two of the most potent chemicals known to man.

In laboratory testing, dioxin has been found to be a million times more deadly than PCBs and DDT, said Lawrence P. Verbit, a chemistry professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

"It (dioxin) is one of the most toxic man-made chemicals, if not the most toxic man-made chemicals," Verbit said.

Carey did not mention dioxin or other chemicals during his remarks, focusing on the PCBs. There is no known antidote to dioxin poisoning.

"I think he was simply trying to emphasize that perhaps the PCBs didn't present that much of a problem," Axelrod said.

Axelrod, who said Carey would suffer severe diarrhea if he drank a glass of PCBs, said health officials were most concerned about the presence of dioxin in the building.

"I certainly wouldn't recommend that he go in there (state building) without protective clothing," Axelrod said. Dr. Philip R. Taylor, a state health department epidemiologist, said it was the discovery of dioxin that led officials to halt the cleanup.

"Clearly it took on a new order of magnitude in our minds or we wouldn't have stopped the cleanup," Taylor said.

State health officials compare the extent of the dioxin contamination to that in Seveso, Italy, after a chemical plant explosion in 1976. Five years after that explosion, one of the worst chemical disasters ever, portions of Seveso still are contaminated and unoccupied.

"We're talking the same ball park of contamination as Seveso, but they had people exposed. Here, the building has been exposed," Taylor said.

The state health department plans April 3 to convene a panel of world experts, including many familiar with Seveso, to discuss the situation at the state building. The meeting will be in New York City.

Carey said yesterday the panel of world experts was being convened "to satisfy the unions."

He said union members would not allow workers to go back to work in the building.

"We're shocked. We can't understand why he's accusing the unions . . . I can't understand why he's contradicting the experts in the health department," said Patricia Cavanagh, field representative of the New York state Public Employees Federation.

Cavanagh said union members have never said they will not re-enter the building.

"We have said we expect the building to be decontaminated before it's occupied again. We've asked the state that an independent firm be retained to do tests and we've also asked to be included in the discussions. There's been nothing on our part on refusing to reenter that building when the time comes," Cavanagh said.

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Carey was just joking, officials say

By LOIS FECTEAU

Gov. Hugh L. Carey must have been joking when he offered to come to Binghamton yesterday and "drink a glass of PCBs," health officials say.

After Carey downplayed health dangers at the contaminated Binghamton State Office Building at a press conference in Albany, state Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod said he thought Carey was being flippant.

"I assume it was a humorous remark. I cannot believe he meant it seriously," said Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, Broome County health commissioner.

At the end of his annual health message, Carey said health dangers from polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) released in the Feb. 5 fire at the state building were overblown. He then offered to "walk into any part of that building and drink a glass of PCBs."

"If I had a few willing hands and some vacuum cleaners, I'd clean (the building) up, myself," the governor said.

Carey was not available this morning to discuss what he meant by his remarks or to see why he focused on PCBs and did not mention dioxin or the other contaminants in the state building. His office said he has no plans to come to Binghamton.

Stephen J. Morello, Carey's deputy press secretary, said today the governor was not minimizing the problem in Binghamton.

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"He said he spent too much time in Love Canal to dismiss it. He was serious as far as the point he was trying to make for cases to be overblown in terms of immediate danger. . . (His remarks are) perhaps something perceived as a flippant comment, but not a dismissal of the problem," Morello said.

Morello also said Carey is aware that the state building also is contaminated with dioxin, the deadly ingredient in Agent Orange, the defoliant used during the Vietnam War.

Carey said he would not worry about his own health in going into the state building.

"I would have to take PCBs in quantities, steadily over a long period of time and probably be pregnant, which I don't intend to become, for there to be a problem. It gets into your fatty tissue and then you have a PCB contamination," Carey said.

PCBs accumulate in the body so "those that we eat, breathe, touch, will be with us for our lifetime," Schecter said.

"I wish the governor would personally complete the cleanup by personally consuming it. No, I can't believe he was serious," Schecter said.

Long-term exposure to PCBs also is linked to liver cancer and skin problems.

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