

NEWS

TOWNSHIP OF WOODBRIDGE



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MAYOR JOHN E. McCORMAC Colonia High School Environmental Assessment Study Thursday, May 26, 2022

Thank you Dr. Massimino and thank you for your leadership during this situation. You have kept the parents of your students and your employees informed of all facts related to this issue and aware of our plans and our progress and we really appreciate working with you and the Woodbridge Board of Education.

Sometime around the end of March, the Township learned of various social media posts related to several incidents of brain tumors and brain cancer among students and faculty of Colonia High School from approximately the period of 1975 to 1999. We contacted the author of the posts, former student and former resident Al Lupiano, and offered to help.

We immediately contacted our environmental engineers, T&M Associates, a well-known engineering and consulting company with a long history of working with our Township, to consult with them about how we could utilize Township resources to help the school district evaluate the situation. We recognized that the Township was uniquely suited to assist because of our relationship with T&M and because we have our own Health Department team of experts that are used to assist our school district with various issues including the COVID-19 pandemic.

T&M engaged the services of a subcontractor, Cabrera Services, Inc., a nationally recognized radiological and environmental remediation company and recommended a course of action to test the air and grounds of Colonia High School recognizing that radiation is widely known as a primary source of brain tumors and cancers.

We then consulted with both our State government, through the Office of New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, and the Federal government through the Office of our Congressman Frank Pallone who luckily is the Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee in the United States House of Representatives which covers environmental issues like the one we are dealing with in Woodbridge Township.

We discussed our plans with them in a 90-minute conference call organized and run by Congressman Pallone on April 4, which also included the New Jersey Departments of Health and Environmental Protection and the Federal offices of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Center for Disease Control and the Agency for Toxic Substance Disease Registry. All parties to the call understood and agreed with the Township's plan.

We fortunately had a Council meeting the next night on April 5 where we passed an Emergency Authorization that allowed us to appropriate \$450,000 in Township funds to investigate the situation with the unanimous support of our Township Council. This allowed us to spend the money currently in the fiscal 2022 budget and raise the funds in the following fiscal 2023 budget.

Although we appropriated the funds, we fully expect to be reimbursed for any expenditures through State and Federal entities and we have made that clear to all parties involved and we have received assurances that they would work with us to accomplish this goal.

Though this is a school district issue and not directly a Township issue, we decided to get involved partly because of our terrific relationship with the Board of Education but also mostly because we could act much quicker and more decisively than either the State or Federal governments. This matter was too important to wait for government bureaucracies to act.

At the same April 5 meeting, we authorized T&M to commence their work with Cabrera through a \$221,350 contract and they began work four days later on Saturday April 9. That day, Cabrera placed radon canisters throughout Colonia High School that stayed in place until they were collected on April 25 and sent to a laboratory for analysis. Those results will be discussed here today. Cabrera also started a complete study of the entire building and grounds of Colonia High School with gamma radiation scanning devices on April 9 that took place that weekend and the next three weekends through April 30. The outside athletic fields were closed down only for the weekend of April 9-10 to minimize interaction between the testers and students and interior testing was only conducted when there were no students in the building. Those test results were also received recently and discussed with various State and Federal agencies and will be discussed here today.

We also looked into various theories that contaminated fill was brought to the site from a landfill 12 miles away when the school was constructed back in 1967. We found no evidence to support this theory. The school was built on forested land with no prior use and construction experts agree that based on the topography of the site, it was very likely that dirt was moved around to level the building but that no material needed to be imported during the process.

Today we are very happy to announce that our extensive testing for both radon and radiation in the interior and exterior of the school building produced no evidence of any cancer causing hazards that warrant further investigation. This is terrific news for the current students of Colonia High School and their parents who worried about their safety along with current staff members and it is great news for all former students who attended and staff who worked at Colonia High School since its opening back in 1968.

We sympathize with anyone who has experienced brain tumors and brain cancers, especially those who lost loved ones to this terrible disease but there is no cause-and-effect relationship between those illnesses and the building or grounds at Colonia High School.

The Environmental Protection Agency and Center for Disease Control have reviewed the findings from Cabrera and agree with our conclusion and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has taken a very active role in the process and has performed a detailed evaluation of the study and also concurs with our conclusion that no further testing is necessary. The DEP also issued a valuable report indicating that there are no overall elevated levels of radiation in our immediate area above normal base levels which further supports our position that no further action is necessary.

At this point, I would like to turn the microphone over to the Commissioner of the New Jersey State Department of Environmental Protection - Mr. Shawn LaTourette.

The State Department of Health was also consulted regarding this matter and performed their own analysis of the issue and issued two reports. The first confirmed a 1997 analysis done by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection that a rock found in a classroom that year was not harmful at all. The second report presented findings on the expected number of brain tumors and cancers relative to this issue. I would now like to turn the microphone over to Dr. Judith Persichilli, the Commissioner of the Department.

Before taking questions, I would like to personally thank all of the Woodbridge Township employees who have worked very hard on this issue for the last 60 days including our Health Director Dennis Green, Deputy Director Phil Bujalski, Business Administrator Vito Cimullica, Chief-of Staff Caroline Ehrlich, Township Clerk John Mitch and especially our Communications Director John Hagerty and his Assistant Megan Kushpa who have worked tirelessly coordinating the dozens of interviews and conversations that we have had and will likely continue to have over the next few days.

That concludes our presentation. We will now take questions from the media. When called on please indicate who you are directing your questions to.

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