DEVELOPING THE LAND

New Madison must cope with old waste

By RON SEELY
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As developers build a new Madison they almost always have to cope first with what's buried beneath the old city — waste and contaminants from an industrial past.

Doug Clark, an environmental lawyer with Foley and Lardner, said the problem of contaminated land in Madison is particularly important now because much of the development happening in the city is taking place on urban lots.

It's almost impossible to develop such property in the city, he added, without coming across the residue of a time when disposing of waste meant throwing it out the back door.

"Most people say you can't put a shovel in the Isthmus and not encounter some kind of contamination," Clark said.

This history has surfaced recently in a number of major Madison development projects.

For developer Todd McGrath of McGrath Associates, cleaning up contamination at the site was a major hurdle in his efforts to build the Union Corners residential and commercial development at Winnebago Street and East Washington Avenue

The property was owned by Spectrum Brands, formerly Rayovac, and was the site of a battery factory from 1916 to 2001.

Records from the state Department of Natural Resources show an investigation of the site in 2003 revealed contamination from battery-related materials and ash down to a depth of 6 feet along with detectable levels of the contaminants cadmium, lead and mercury.

McGrath negotiated with Rayovac to clean up the site under the provisions of a state and federal initiative called the Voluntary Party Liability Exemption program. Under the program, developers and owners of contaminated properties are protected from liability for any future discoveries of contaminants if the site is cleaned up to the DNR's satisfaction.

"It's a very effective way to work on cleanup of the urban environment and still have some predictability for the developer," McGrath said of the arrangement.

Eventually, 60,368 tons of contaminated soil was hauled away from the site, according to the DNR.

Other developers have had to face monumental cleanups in their efforts to develop properties in Madison, especially in the Isthmus area.

Dan Peterson, with the Alexander Company said the developers had to clean up 18 underground fuel tanks in the railroad corridor near Regent Street and West Washington Avenue before they could build office and retail buildings there. The cleanup cost $1.2 million.

The contamination at such sites makes development much more difficult, McGrath said. Building projects become not only more expensive but also take longer to complete, which adds even more cost.

"The remediation process slows down the development process," said McGrath. "That's a big issue."

Clark said contaminated sites can also make lenders wary of loaning money for development of a site, even if the owners and developers of a particular piece of property are in agreement.

Pat McCutcheon, an expert on landfill cleanups with the DNR, said the agency oversees a number of programs designed to make the cleanup of urban sites easier.

These include the liability exemption program used by McGrath as well as Brownfield grants that provide money for development of contaminated city sites. Last year, McCutcheon added, Madison received $1 million under the program.

Even with such programs, however, some projects fall through because the history of contamination at a site is just too extensive.

Contamination

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Only one source

But the landfills are just one source of underground pollution in Madison.

Demolished or abandoned factories, underground gasoline storage tanks from long-gone service stations and the sites of closed dry-cleaning businesses all contribute to a potentially dangerous mix of chemicals that lace the soil beneath the city and sometimes work their way into our drinking water supplies.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this history and the resulting pollution is that it is frequently hidden until a contaminant shows up in a well.

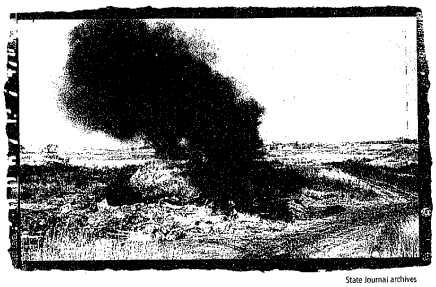
In fact, in its proposal to help the Madison Water Utility find a site for a well to replace the contaminated Well No. 3, consultant Montgomery Associates warned that the biggest problems may be posed by contamination sources that are not identified in any database.

"This is coming back to haunt everybody," said the firm's Robert Montgomery of the long history of careless waste disposal. "And groundwater moves very slowly so we may not see some impacts for decades."

17 contaminants

In 2003, high levels of carbon tetrachloride, an industrial carcinogen, in Well No. 3 on the East Isthmus prompted the DNR to begin an investigation of the pollution and its source.

Within just a quarter mile of the well, McCutcheon — whose job includes investigating sources of contamination — found nearly a dozen sites that had a history of contamination including a railroad yard, a city of Madison garage and waste oil recovery site, a couple of auto repair shops and paint and machine shops. Leaking underground storage tanks were found on at least six of these sites.



State Journal archives

Now a grassy open space where residents exercise their dogs, Greentree Landfill on Hammersley Road was once a landfill from which dark clouds of smoke rose into the sky as trash was burned.

In his investigation, McCutcheon zeroed in on the site of an old paint factory, Lindsay Finishes. There had been previous detections of carbon tetrachloride on the property at 1902 E. Johnson St.

McCutcheon sampled the soil and found 17 different industrial contaminants, including carbon tetrachloride.

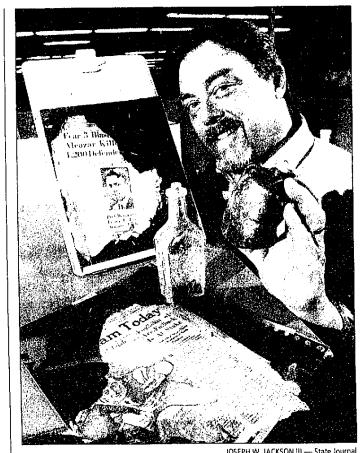
As he frequently does when he is tracking pollution through time, McCutcheon found a former employee of the now-closed paint factory, a 77-year-old man who had worked at the factory for about 18 years, starting in 1946.

The employee recalled that coal and coal ash were dumped by wheelbarrow on the ground behind the plant and that liquids from the factory were dumped directly on top of the ash piles. The worker recalled that the factory used both carbon tetrachloride and trichloroethylene as degreasers on equipment.

In the end, McCutcheon concluded that the industrial contaminants found at the site of the old paint factory may indeed have been the source of pollutants found in both the deep and shallow aquifer from which the nearby city well pumped drinking water. But the findings, he added, were not conclusive.

The widespread presence of underground pollutants in so many locations on the Isthmus are indications, McCutcheon said, that the legacy of buried contaminants will be with us for many years.

"When I retire," McCutcheon said, "there is going to be plenty of work for those who come after me."



JOSEPH W. JACKSON III — State Journal

David Benzschawel's title with the city of Madison may have been civil engineer but, until his retirement last week, he also served as an amateur historian and archaeologist by studying the city's old landfills. Among the fruits of his labors — many old bottles and newspapers from as long ago as the 1930s.

LANDFILL HISTORY

He catalogs dump-site archaeology

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Though David Benzschawel formally served the city of Madison for years as a civil engineer in the public works department, he was often as much an archaeologist and historian.

Benzschawel, who retired last week from his job with the city, spent more than 20 years compiling a map of the dozens of old dump sites scattered across the city of Madison.

The task was undertaken in the 1980s as the city started to realize the potential for such sites to cause pollution and other problems.

But the buried history of the city's waste fascinated Benzschawel, who grew up on Lakeside Street and can remember the smell of tires being burned at the Olin Landfill, now Quann Park.

The map includes information on more than 50 old waste disposal sites. None of the sites are still in use but the background on each of them can be potentially useful at a time when so many urban locations are being developed.

Benzschawel would find out about old dump sites from numerous sources — city utility workers or builders, for example, who might come across something in the course of their work. Often when he heard about a particular site, Benzschawel would simply head out with a shovel and begin digging around, seeing what he could turn up.

"You'd pick a nice day and go out and do a little amateur archaeology," Benzschawel said.

The kind of garbage he dug up would often provide the clues Benzschawel needed to date the site. Some old locations, especially major historic disposal sites such as Law Park, contained lots of newspapers.

"That's how we could tell the age of the waste in some of these places," Benzschawel recalled. "You just pull the newspaper out and read the date."

Often, Benzschawel's sleuthing would lead to fascinating historical anecdotes.

For years, he was told, garbage was simply shoved into Lake Monona at Law Park. A snow fence hooked on poles and driven into the lake bed captured trash before it could float away.

"The stuff that floated would get caught in the fence," Benzschawel said, "and you'd have to go out in a boat and collect it."

Remote Russian region aims for self-sufficiency

By STEVEN LEE MYERS
The New York Times

Chukotka is at the edge of the earth, one of Russia's most remote and poor regions, a frozen expanse bigger than Texas but with a population that could fit inside the Astrodome.

Like much of Russia's Far North, the vast arc of tundra and permafrost above the Arctic Circle, it has captured the imaginations of czars and general secretaries and now a new generation of leaders. For centuries, they have aspired to conquer its unforgiving isolation, often with schemes that defy the imagination.

The latest such scheme emerged last week with a proposal to link Chukotka to Alaska by building a 63-mile tunnel under the icy waters of the Bering Strait — a man-made rejoining of the two continents. Pointing out that the tunnel would essentially begin and end nowhere (Chukotka has few roads, let alone railroads) misses the essential point of the Arctic's place in the Russian soul.

It is a place of explorers, adventurers and survivors, of endurance, tradition and ambition. The tunnel idea evoked the grand designs the Soviet Union crafted to unlock the natural resources of Siberia by decree and, in the beginning at least, with the subjugated labor of the gulag.

That legacy, clearly, lives on, but other, less pie-in-the-ice ideas are incubating in Chukotka. The World Wildlife Fund has created a project with native Chukchi hunters to protect the region's polar bears, now endangered by the threats of a changing climate and rampant poaching.

In Vankarem, a tiny coastal village on the Chukchi Sea, hunters established a "bear patrol" last year with the intent of keeping a safe distance between villagers and the growing number of bears that come ashore as they migrate in search of their preferred environs, floating sea ice.

No less ambitious has been the effort of Chukotka's governor, Roman Abramovich, to lift the region out of the poverty and desolation it found itself in after the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s.

He is Russia's richest man, an oil tycoon turned investor who owns the Chelsea Football Club in London (where he clearly prefers to live). Since being elected governor in 2000 and reappointed by President Vladimir Putin in 2005, he has revived the region — in large part with money raised by the personal income tax he pays there and two charities he has created. He has largely rebuilt Chukotka's homes and hospitals.

Next up is the economy, which is still dependent on government subsidies for fuel, food and jobs because the harsh winters and only slightly less harsh summers make life in Chukotka virtually unsustainable.

"The governor has a goal of making Chukotka self-sufficient within the next few years," said his American spokesman, John A. Mann. "To do that, you have to develop natural resources and bring in investments. It is not the easiest thing to do."

Certainly not. During the Cold War, Chukotka was a closed border zone, bristling with military installations that are now abandoned lots filled with the rusting detritus of Soviet power. Government permission is still required before a visit, but the Arctic beckons and is, slowly, opening itself to the possibilities of a new Russia.

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