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Middle school project stalls

BY MARI MAXWELL
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TOPSHAM — Work expected to begin this month on the new Mt. Ararat Middle School may be stalled until the district has the Navy deed in hand, and that may not happen until issues relating to the possible contamination of the site are resolved, officials said.

School Administrative District 75 Superintendent J. Michael Wilhelm said today that without the deed in hand, the district cannot obtain Planning Board approval.

"Until we own the property, this project is held up," he said.

The demolition contract is ready to go out to bid, but work cannot begin until the Navy signs over the land to the district. Preliminary work to be done includes the demolition of the barracks and roadwork as well as bringing utilities to the site. The $15.8 million new middle school would house 900 students and is expected to be completed by the fall of 2000.

The Navy donated the land in

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the Navy Annex on Republic Avenue to the district. However, that deed remains outstanding.

There may be contamination on the site, which was a former Air Force base before it was transferred to the Navy, said Mark Hyland, a director of the Division of Remediation within the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

Hyland said he doesn't know if underground storage tanks on site have created any problems. It is his division within the state agency that oversees site cleanups.

"The federal government has a requirement. Wherever the military transfers property, they allow the state to review the property," he said. "The Navy hasn't allowed us to do that."

Hyland said a baseline study done by the Navy in 1996 but obtained by the state only last week, would help the DEP determine whether there were significant leaks or spills of oil on the property. An update on that study has also been recently completed. That revision, Wilhelm said, states the property can be transferred.

Denise Messier, who also works with the DEP, confirmed that the department received the study last week and has yet to examine it. Messier said she will meet with Navy environmental representatives this morning to discuss the study.

"They're adamant they've followed all the rules," she said. "No matter what happens, should there be possible contamination, the Department of Defense will need to address it."

Messier added that there is no way for the DEP to prohibit the transfer.