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Navy report gives clean bill to Annex

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TOPSHAM — A Feb. 24 Navy report examining possible environmental problems at the site of the proposed new Mt. Ararat Middle School gives the tract a clean bill of health, but it could be 30 days before the state signs off on it.

That timeframe is not likely to affect the district's building schedule, since the Navy signed the deed on Monday transferring its former annex to School Administrative District 75.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection raised concerns Monday about possible contamination at the Navy Annex on Republic Avenue. Once an Air Force base, the site has been used by the Navy mainly as office space, Brunswick Naval Air Station spokesman John James said today.

Both DEP and Navy environmental experts met Monday to discuss possible contamination issues and will tour the site today with an environmental engineer.

The report is an update of a 1996 environmental baseline survey and was completed by the Navy's northern division in Pennsylvania. It outlines and identifies the almost 40 acres — with buildings, ball fields and parking lots — transferred to the school district. Among the environmental issues noted in the report are asbestos, lead paint, radon, under- and above-ground storage tanks, and the drainage system.

A study completed in 1997 noted asbestos-containing materials such as floor tile, pipe insulation, ceiling tile and roofing materials within the buildings. Those buildings have been renovated and the asbestos taken care of, or have been demolished.

"No additional action is required by the Navy regarding asbestos," the report notes.

Radon levels were below recommended levels and underground storage tanks have been removed or abandoned in place and filled with sand. No further action is required by the Navy on that front, either, the report states.

Two Navy environmental engineers, Mary A. Hunt and James I. Mills, along with Navy industrial Hygienist Thomas F. Snyder, concluded that based upon their study there were "no current environmental concerns which would preclude the transfer of the property."

"We consider this property to be environmentally suitable for transfer for similar use," the trio noted.

Anthony Williams, an environmental engineer with Brunswick Naval Air Station, confirmed the results, saying he didn't believe any environmental issues were outstanding, either.

"The property transfer was a first for the Navy," he said.

Williams admitted there were some communication mishaps between the Navy and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. However, he added that the signing over of the deed Monday met the deadline.

"We should have and could have involved DEP earlier," he said. "We thought it was done. We thought they were involved with the process."

Denise Messier of the DEP said a project manager with the state will study the baseline environmental study and the addendum and give reports to the school district and Navy.

"I believe the transfer will go through," she said. "We really like to make an effort to get these done in 30 days. I expect we'll do that."

However, "just because the Navy transferred the land to the school district, it doesn't mean the Navy won't continue working with the DEP over any environmental concerns the state agency might have. According to James, "Just because we've transferred the property to Topsham, we don't plan to walk away from the site."

SAD 75 Superintendent J. Michael Wilhelm said the Navy has assured him if any environmental hazards remain, it would take responsibility for them.