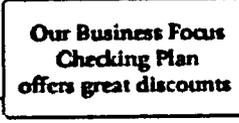


EAST BAY: Angry parents heard at forum on Na...

11-24-98



GO TO: [Local News Section] [More Community Stories] POST TO: ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

11.24.98 07:46:48

Angry parents heard at forum on Navy playground

■ A panel of medical and environmental experts try to allay fears about a possible health threat at the contaminated site where children played.

By MICHAEL CORKERY
Journal Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN -- Federal, state and Navy officials faced an angry group of parents last night in a forum about the use of the now-closed playground at Katy field, which sits above a Superfund site at the Naval Station Newport.

The panel of medical and environmental experts tried to allay fears about a possible health threat, but concern only seemed to deepen after two parents testified last night that their young children showed signs of chemical exposures after playing in the field this summer.

"This has become a real public relations boondogle on the part of the Navy," said U.S. Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, who organized last night's meeting in Town Hall. "But I can tell you there is nothing that strikes at the heart of a parent than concern for their child's health. We need to find answers. This issue has been blown up because people have been trying to cover their backsides."

Kennedy criticized the way Navy and federal officials have handled the situation, since the public learned that children had been playing on the former burial site for contaminated material for the Navy's firefighter training facility.

Kennedy blasted Navy officials for not restricting children from using the field, when the Environmental Protection Agency first notified them in July about its concerns of possible health risks.

Kennedy criticized the EPA for failing to raise a red flag sooner. Officials in the EPA's regional office in Boston had been concerned about the "intense" recreational use of Katy field since April, according to Donald Berger, of the EPA.

But Kennedy said the agency was too slow in communicating those concerns to the Navy. The first formal notification from the EPA that Navy officials should not use the field for recreational use came in the letter dated July 28, according to NETC spokesman David Sanders.

From June to August, about 60 children in the Navy's summer camp used the field for outdoor activities and about 65 children

from the Middletown Little League played games on the baseball diamond.

Children involved in the base's day-care program continued to play in the field throughout the early fall, said base commander Capt. A. Cheryl Oakleaf. The Navy fenced off the area last month, after consulting with Kennedy and EPA officials.

"We considered closing the area, but there are degrees that an agency will go to in enforcement" Berger said. "Although we were concerned about the health dangers, it was not something that needed to be done tomorrow, we wanted it done quickly."

The EPA argued that the former burial ground for the Navy's firefighting training area should not be used as a ballfield or play area for children because the 5.5-acre parcel was known to contain lead, semivolatile materials, and other dangerous chemicals.

The Navy insists that a 1993 federal risk assessment declared the land was safe to use. NETC officials said the presence of children was acceptable so long as they were supervised by adults.

But federal and Navy officials said last night that their data was incomplete and nearly five years old. New tests ordered last week would reveal the latest state of contamination, they said.

"We can't guarantee that there isn't a health threat," said Berger. "But that doesn't mean there is one."

While the Navy and EPA debated the seriousness of the threat, Sara Gallagher, of Tiverton, said her 8-year-old daughter, who played in Katy field nearly every day this summer, started getting sick.

Gallagher, who was employed by the Navy as a camp counselor, said the doctor told her that her daughter showed signs of arsenic poisoning, including severe headaches, vomiting and weight loss.

"As a counselor, I felt responsible for those children. I was never told about this. I learned about it on the television news," said Gallagher, who has since taken a leave of absence from her job on the base. "Nobody has been willing to give us the appropriate answers."

According to Gallagher, the family's physician found traces of lead, magnesium and arsenic in her blood. But Carole Hossom of the federal agency for toxic substances and disease registry said those substances could be found almost anywhere, not just at Katy field.

Hossom said it was unlikely that the low level of contamination, revealed by the most recent tests of the site, could cause these health problems.

"From a scientific standpoint there is no cause for alarm, but as parents I understand your concern," said Hossom.

Another parent, Suzanne Moniz, of Middletown, was also told by

her physician that her 8-year-old son, who played Little League at Katy field this summer, showed signs of chemical exposure.

Moniz said the doctor did not speculate on the source of the toxins found in the boy's blood, but she felt unsettled by news reports that the Little League field was part of a Superfund site.

"It could just be coincidence, but I just don't know," she said.

Both Gallagher and Moniz requested a list of possible contaminants found on the site. Sanders said the Navy and the disease registry would prepare a report detailing possible chemicals and distribute to all physicians in the state by the end of next week.

EPA and naval environmental officials are processing the latest soil samples taken on the site last week. They hope to have the results by the middle of next month. Once those results are released, Kennedy would like to hold another forum to assess the situation in January.

"We need to flush out the real threats," said Kennedy. "It all sounds good tonight, but we need more answers."

Add ~~your own comment~~ on this topic

[Back to top](#)

Copyright © 1998 The Providence Journal Company
Produced by www.projo.com