Army work continues at dump site; temporary evacuation ends

By SALLY ACHARYA

Testing and cleanup at a historic dump site prompted the temporary relocation of admissions, enrollment, and performing arts staff, as well as the Child Development Center (CDC) last week as the Army Corps of Engineers worked to clean up remnants of World War I Army experiments.

Results of soil tests are expected this week along with results of further tests at the daycare center, where legal but elevated levels of arsenic were found in the soil in December. Mulch has been spread on the ground and the 30 children were relocated during the nearby excavation.

"We were not in their evacuation zone or the area of concern, but since we have children, just for peace of mind we decided to go over to Leonard Hall," said Verna Green, administrator of the Child Development Center, which serves university employees, students, and neighbors. Arsenic levels at the daycare center appear to fall within the acceptable range set by the Environmental Protection Agency, but because of the nature of the facility more detailed testing will be conducted.

Arsenic is a naturally occurring element of soil and has been used in herbicides, but it's also a byproduct of the production of lewisite, a chemical warfare agent used in World War I and tested by the U.S. Army when it occupied the campus in 1917 and 1918. Arsenic-tainted soil can be a health hazard to people who ingest it over a period of time or come into skin contact with it, making it more of a concern for children or grounds workers likely to be digging in the dirt, rather than students or other employees.

"I'm fairly sure we'll have to do additional sampling in certain [other] locations," particularly around the Watkins and Kreeger buildings, said Maj. Brian Plaisted of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But even if further testing shows levels of contamination by arsenic or other substances high enough to require soil removal, this can be done

safely without another relocation, Plaisted said.

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Extensive sampling of campus over the past few years has pinpointed several localized spots with high levels of arsenic, a few of which exceed the EPA maximum of 43 parts per million, he said. One 18-inch-deep sample in front of Kreeger Hall read 141 parts per million, while a surface sample by the roadway near Watkins Hall read 59 parts per million. The reading at the CDC was 31.3 parts per million. The investigation of the AU campus began in 1993 with the accidental discovery of a munitions burial pit in the residential area of Spring Valley. An isolated spot behind the Hamilton building was eventually pinpointed as a possible minor dump for dismantled laboratories or, in a less likely scenario, a burial spot for chemical munitions. The major dump appears to have been on nearby land that is now the home of the South Korean ambassador.

During last week's excavation, offices at Hamilton and Kreeger buildings were relocated to various campus locations as a precaution, although no hazardous exposure was expected, Plaisted said. The four-day dig uncovered shards of glass tubing and jars that could once have contained laboratory chemicals, but no unbroken vials or munitions were found, he said.

Air samples taken during the procedure detected no mustard agents or lewisite, the World War I chemical agents produced on campus by Army scientists.

All of the excavation last week was on AU property. Related work earlier involved the removal and replacement of contaminated soil at the South Korean ambassador's residence behind AU, which appears to have been the primary burial site for chemical debris. Several adjacent properties were affected by the World War I work, when the newly opened university was turned over to the U.S. Army for training and experiments, much of it on outlying land that was later sold to real estate developers.

"Monday morning was pretty chaotic, but people have adapted really well. It's certainly diversionary," said Cheryl Storie, assistant vice president of enrollment services. "Luckily this was not the peak time [for enrollment activity]. The worst part of it is our parking lot's gone."

While most employees returned to their usual workplace after four days, the office of admissions, citing parking issues, has decided to keep its Welcome Center in the lobby of the Ward Circle Building, across from the Nebraska Parking Lot, to greet parents and students coming to campus for interviews and the twice-a-day tours.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers provides a detailed project description and updates of the AU investigation on its Web Site at <www.nab.usace.army.mil/projects/WashingtonDC/springvalley.htm>.

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