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Consultant: Emissions at asphalt site not hazardous

By Prudence Brighton, Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD -- A consultant for the Board of Health last night reported that based on current science, the levels of chemicals and compounds emitted from a proposed asphalt manufacturing facility will not pose a health hazard.

But Dr. David McIntosh, a Needham-based scientist, raised a red flag over rock-crushing operations already under way near the Route 40 site where Newport Materials Inc. has proposed the manufacturing plant. The issue could lead to a wider Board of Health study.

Board member Susan Hanly, who is also a school nurse, reported that asthma levels at the nearby Miller School are already above average. She asked if information is available on particulates from existing operations.

Doug Deschenes, the attorney representing Newport Materials, said he would be happy to provide "a semblance" of that information. Deschenes reminded the board that Newport Materials is "next to a massive operation already," a reference to Fletcher's Quarry.

Newport Materials is hoping to build a plant that would produce up to 1,000 tons of asphalt per day.

Describing the health board's involvement as "very important," member Joanne Martel said the Newport Materials issue is "opening our eyes to what else is happening out there."

McIntosh concluded that compounds reported to have odor thresholds are lower than levels that would be hazardous.

"You would be able to smell things before hazardous levels were reached," he said.

McIntosh found, however, that levels of particulates at monitoring sites for existing sites are elevated to the background, which he defined as what would normally be expected, but they are substantially below levels deemed acceptable in air-quality standards.

The Department of Public Health has recommended that the Board of Health seek additional information, including further analysis of potential emissions; assessment of the health effects on sensitive populations in the vicinity; assessment of local meteorological records; and methods of mitigation, such as diesel engine retrofits for trucks.

Project proponents will take their case to the Scotty Hollow condominiums tonight. Scotty Hollow is the closest Chelmsford site to the asphalt plant.

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