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Chemicals at old Anacortes treatment plant didn't harm water, city says

By AARON WEINBERG @Aaron_SVH Apr 24, 2017

ANACORTES — Low levels of arsenic, lead and PCBs were discovered at the former Anacortes water treatment plant in January 2015, but those chemicals pose no risk to city drinking water or public health, the city announced Monday.

The announcement came on the same day that the city filed a 1,400-page report with the state Department of Ecology requesting assistance in forming a safe strategy to demolish the building and clean up the former water treatment plant site. The plant was decommissioned in 2013.

The city identified the chemicals during an initial screening of the treatment plant's materials, a routine procedure prior to demolition, Public Works Director Fred Buckenmeyer said.

When asked why the city waited two years to reveal the findings, City Attorney Darcy Swetnam said Monday that the city determined early on that there was no impact to public health.

"We have done our due diligence to investigate the site," she said. "We wanted to make sure we had all of the information."

She said within days of discovering the chemicals, officials went back through years of water sample records to confirm there were never any compounds in the water.

If any problems with the water had been detected, Ecology would have been notified sooner, Swetnam said.

Buckenmeyer said once the city determined the water was clean, "it became a matter of how do we clean up these materials."

The city launched the website safeandcleanwater.com on Monday with information on the demolition project, including an FAQ section and a report of its findings. The city is also working with Gallatin Public Affairs on the issue, a company hired by the city's outside counsel.

"... Independent experts confirmed the water is safe and that there is no threat to customers, current and former employees, or water treatment plant visitors," the website states.

The old treatment plant, built in 1969, was replaced by a new \$62 million plant in 2013 on the same site on River Bend Road in Mount Vernon. The two facilities are about 200 feet apart.

In checking into the safety situation, city officials said they looked at ways a person could be exposed to the chemicals, such as staff working at the site or someone trespassing on the site. They determined there were no health dangers there either.

"We were able to determine those compounds weren't leaching off the old facility," Swetnam said. "It definitely wasn't leaching into the river."

Buckenmeyer said the amount of chemical present was small.

"We are talking parts per billion," he said.

The contaminants are primarily from the paint on the building at the old facility. The paint has chipped off and contaminated the soil at the base of the building, Buckenmeyer said.

Before demolishing the old plant, a plan must be established with the Department of Ecology. It could be more than a year before the old plant is demolished, city staff said. It will also cost more than expected.

The process will involve several steps, said Ecology spokesman Larry Altose.

The first step will be establishing a legal agreement to formalize a working relationship between the city and Ecology, Altose said. That process could take weeks to months as lawyers hash out the details.

When the legal agreement is reached, Ecology will review the city's 1,400-page report on the chemical findings at the former water treatment plant. The city hired Bellevue firm Stantec Consulting Services to prepare the report.

"We make sure we don't see anything missing," Altose said. "If there is, we will work with the city and their consultant to pull together items that need to be addressed."

If Ecology finds the report complete, a public comment period will open. Ecology will then review all public comments and again decide whether the report is complete.

The next steps include determining the best way to clean the site, creating an action plan, then executing the plan.

Altose said it's normal to find those types of chemicals in older buildings. More stringent health standards were put in place in the 1980s.

"At the time this building was constructed, PCBs may have been in paints, caulking and other building materials," he said. "It's not surprising to find those ... It happens quite frequently."

Ecology provides grants for this type of cleanup, but Altose said the source of that grant funding — tax from hazardous materials and petroleum products — has dried up recently.

He said he was impressed with the city's approach to the matter.

"They are showing a clear dedication to protecting public health and the environment by making these efforts to assess potential risks as part of this planning process in order to get ready to demolish the old facility," Altose said.

The city paid about \$20,000 to hire Gallatin Public Affairs to build the safeandcleanwater.com website, among other services.

City staff said it could take a couple days to determine how much it has spent on testing the site. The city hired private companies in the fall and winter of 2016 to perform more thorough testing, Swetnam said.

The new water treatment plant serves about 56,000 customers in Anacortes, La Conner, Oak Harbor and Whidbey Island Naval Air Station. It pumps water from the Skagit River.

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