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Lancaster and Harrisburg Authorities conceal a “toxic time bomb”

by Bill Keisling

Many in Lancaster County are aware that Harrisburg is buried under a mountain of debt from its long-failed incinerator. Less known is what Harrisburg has buried under a mountain of toxic ash piled some 80 feet high next to the incinerator.

Built as it was in the early 1970s, Harrisburg’s incinerator, by today’s standards, was technologically primitive, and dirty.

Incinerators burn fuel: garbage. Different kinds of garbage produce different toxins. Some wastes produce mercury and heavy metals, or even radioactive compounds. Burn plastics and you’ll get dioxins and other chemicals.

Mix them all together, let it sit for years, and often you don’t know what you get.

These worst practices went on for decades. As a result no one today honestly knows what was burned — or what residue remains behind in the growing piles of ash on site, or was carried away by ground water, or the wind.

Runoff from rain and the incineration process is called leachate. Think of it like a giant, toxic coffee percolator. The rain washes on top, percolates down, and runs off into the ground water toward the nearby Susquehanna River. How bad was the dioxin problem?

By the late-90s the EPA would set a standard for incinerator smoke of 30 nanograms per dry standard cubic meter of air, or 30 ng/dscm.

Smokestack samples of the Harrisburg incinerator’s emissions from the 1980s, however, when most of Mt. Ashmore accumulated, alarmingly pointed to dioxin levels of 40,000 to 80,000 ng/dscm.

In 1994, DEP found 1,157 ng/dscm of dioxin in one of the Harrisburg incinerators burners.

In 1996, inspectors found 7,074 ng/dscm in the second unit.

“There is ... no visible effort on the horizon likely to address the ash problem in the foreseeable future,” the **Harrisburg Patriot** presciently wrote. *“Rather, city officials seem to be stalling for time, hoping for an act of God or a buyer to take the incinerator and its ash problems off its hands...”*

“The city, for all the money it has put into the incinerator operations, has permitted it to turn into a financial and environmental time bomb.”

In 2000, Dr. Barry Commoner, a biologist and one of the founders of the modern environmental movement, released a widely read international study describing Harrisburg’s incinerator as one of the leading sources of dioxin pollution thousands of miles away in the Canadian arctic.

In November, 2000, the EPA regional administrator wrote: *“As you know, the Harrisburg incinerator was recently identified ... as one of the largest North American sources of dioxins/furans emissions that adversely affect*

Broughton Island, just north of the Arctic Circle on Baffin Bay.

*Although one may challenge the validity of the study that concludes the [Harrisburg incinerator] is a significant source of dioxins/furans on Broughton Island, **there is no doubt that (the Harrisburg incinerator) is one of, and perhaps, the most significant single source of dioxins/furans in the United States.***

The Lancaster and Harrisburg authorities commissioned engineering studies from the ARM Group – not from different sources as one would expect – and refuse to release them to the public on the pretext that they have a ‘confidentiality agreement’!

Jim Warner, president of LCSWMA put forth the interesting proposition that there is no problem. Not only does LCSWMA not plan to clean up ‘Mt. Ashmore’, the Lancaster

Authority hopes to dump more ash on site. The plan is to tear down the public works building next to the incinerator and dump more ash in a proposed new field the authority wants regulators to approve.

On September 25, 2012, Jack Lausch, formerly with the Lancaster Authority, and today the facility director of the Harrisburg incinerator, wrote **“The new permit holder assumes all liabilities from the date when the original permit was first issued.”** In other words, the Lancaster Authority and its customers will be responsible for all cleanup costs of the mismanaged Harrisburg facility going back to 1972.

Will the owner of the Harrisburg incinerator, whoever that is, finally one day be forced to pay the piper for a long-overdue cleanup of ‘Mt. Ashmore’?

Is Ernie Schreiber at it again?

It was with sadness for the death of an infant, whether before or after birth, and the plight of its teenage mother that we viewed the follow up article **“McCaskey student out of prison; Accused of putting baby in trash can.”**

But it was with horror and disgust that we saw the nineteen year old girl’s photo on the front page.

When he was editor of the evening *New Era*, Schreiber would titillate his readers with stories and pictures of prostitutes, all the time in a tone of ‘tsk tsking’.

Schreiber would also disregard journalistic ethics by publishing exit polls conducted during the morning of election days in his afternoon edition.

We could not look ourselves in the mirror if we were to try to profit from the misery of a nineteen year old girl attending a local high school by publishing her picture.

We wonder: Had the girl been Caucasian and from a suburban high school, would the story even have been covered? If so, would there have been a photo?

The above items have been excerpted from www.NewsLanc.com. Visit the website daily for news, commentary, letters, and other features. Suggestions and letters can be sent anonymously through the home page.