

Editorial Climate!

Pollution in Memphis - and Politics

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A Record For Insensitivity

By MARVIN BAILEY

GOVERNMENT response to the two serious toxic chemical problems that exist in the Memphis community today has been, at best, amateurish. It is as much as could be expected at the local levels where budget-strapped officials have been unable to fund the sophisticated technical expertise necessary to treat such problems.

But the scientific dimension of the problems notwithstanding, Mayor Wyeth Chandler's response to the human dimension of the problems has set a record for insensitivity.

ONE COMMUNITY PROBLEM exists in the Frayser area where citizens have been complaining about various illnesses. While the evidence linking those illnesses to environmental contamination is circumstantial, it is nonetheless substantial. One suspected source is air pollution, and recently the Environmental Protection Agency announced that one firm near Frayser, Chromasco (three firms citywide were cited by the EPA), had been operating in violation of local air quality standards since they were written and had been operating without a permit since 1975.

While emissions from the plant cover Frayser homes like a shroud, Chandler, who likes to project the image of a tough law-and-order mayor, responded to the health concerns of Frayser residents by officially sanctioning the company's illegal activity.

"Good citizens" he called the violators, because "they provide jobs." He ignores the fact that the air quality standards are set according to human health criteria and his comments fly in the face of a basic humanitarian concept that no one should be required to pay industrial profits with his health.

The evidence against the Hollywood dump is substantial and concrete. One section of the dumpsite (the area west of North Hollywood Drive) is the so-called "endrin pit," actually a mound of dangerous endrin wastes from the vicinity of the Velsicol Chemical Co. The site east of North Hollywood Drive was long used as a dump for chemical wastes. According to findings of the EPA, the east Hollywood site is leaching a variety of synthetic organic compounds, among them chlordane, endrin, heptachlor, aldrin, and heptachlor epoxide. The west site is leaching a variety of heavy metals (chromium, copper, lead, nickel, zinc, and mercury) and synthetic organic chemicals (chlordane, benzene, chlorobenzene, and alpha-BHC), the EPA reports.

According to the report, leachate from the dumpsites flow into the Wolf River (near where a commercial hog lot is located) and into a nearby dredge pond where fishing is allowed to continue. The flow into the dredge pond, the report states, combines with the

flow of a drainage ditch which contains a combination of leachate, raw sewage and trash.

THE REPORT CONCLUDES that the Hollywood dump is "a disgrace from both an aesthetic and public health standpoint." It recommends corrective action to prevent fishing in the area (the fish may end up in commercial markets), to remove the hog lot and to fence off the entire site to prevent further human contact with the heavily contaminated soil.

Chandler's response, however, has been that the city hasn't "the legal right or moral obligation" to fence off the 87-acre dump. Chandler says the city does not own the land and therefore cannot fence it. Yet, he admits that the city has, in fact, fenced in part of it — one site where heavy concentrations of chemicals were found and one site where barrels were buried. The fencing done by the city, however, is flimsy and in some places already torn down.

Most of the chemicals found in the dumpsite are known to cause cancer in animals. Benzene is a known human carcinogen. Many of them, such as heptachlor/chlordane and aldrin, have been removed from the market. In many of the samples taken at the sites by the EPA, concentrations were high. One sample, for instance, contained 5,000 milligrams per kilogram of chlordane. But high or low, any level of exposure to a carcinogen produces a risk of cancer — there is no safe level of exposure, no threshold of activity. These chemicals can enter the human body through the skin, and in the body of a child their adverse effects are quicker because of a child's high metabolic rate.

The sense of outrage evident in the Hollywood neighborhood then is no surprise. The dumpsite is a deadly magnet attracting the children of that community. This summer, as during summers past, the children in the neighborhood will play barefoot in soils so contaminated with toxic chemicals that EPA personnel who worked in them wore protective clothing.

As long as the Hollywood dump offers easy access to children of this city, it makes a mockery of government responsibility. Legal means exist to condemn so obvious a health hazard. And surely there exists a moral obligation to act.

THE CHEMICAL contamination of this community's environment because of past negligence is a fact of life. That much cannot be changed. What can and must change, however, is the community response to the problems caused by pollution. The community must admit that the problems exist, that they are serious, and that they are our problems. They cannot be allowed to become problems for just segments of this community.