

East Chicago mayor refuses to reveal plan for lead-poisoned housing complex

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East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland has refused to disclose the details of the future use of the site of the West Calumet Housing Complex, slated for demolition under the executive order signed by Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb on February 9. Although previously rejected by previous governor Mike Pence, Holcomb declared the emergency in the city to obtain funding for the removal of lead and arsenic in the soil in residential areas.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has pressed East Chicago Democratic Mayor Anthony Copeland for the details of how he plans to use the site of the West Calumet Housing Complex. On March 22, Robert Kaplan, acting regional director of EPA Region 5, issued a letter to Copeland urging him to disclose the details of the future use of the West Calumet site. In the letter, Kaplan explained that no cleanup plan can be selected and implemented by the EPA until the site's future use is determined.

The contamination of the soil was caused by lead and arsenic residue in the soil on which the complex was built in the 1970s. The lead and arsenic seeped into the soil from the waste dumping of U.S. Smelter and Lead (USS Lead) and from the adjacent DuPont facility, in operation from 1910-1949, which manufactured arsenic-laden insecticide. The current lead contamination in the soil is largely the result of operations of USS Lead and DuPont, including large amounts of waste dumped by USS Lead during its years of operation.

In a 2011 report by the EPA Region 5, it was noted that "Wastes which were produced during smelting operations are calcium sulfate sludge, blast furnace flue-dust, bag-house bags, rubber and plastic battery casings, and waste slag. Much of these wastes were stored on-site for recycling or disposal. All of the wastes, as well as on-site surface soils, are heavily contaminated with lead and other metals."

Lead contamination poses serious health risks for both adults and children. In adults, it can cause chronic headaches, problems with cognitive functioning, digestive disorders, anemia, and hypertension. In children, it can cause brain disorders, hyperactivity, anemia, digestive problems, and the possibility of lowered IQ. Residents of West Calumet have reported health concerns such as chronic headaches, digestive disorders, and hyperactivity in children, but the Lake County Health Department has thus far reported no health concerns in the community as a result of lead contamination.

The West Calumet Housing Complex is managed by the Indiana Department of Housing and Urban Development. All residents must meet the county's low-income threshold in order to make them eligible for public housing and housing assistance programs. Residents were told to leave by April 3 by the executive order, but due to a lack of affordable housing available in Indiana, 56 residents remain in the complex as of Friday; many are children.

Mayor Copeland worked closely with Governor Holcomb to draw up the executive order passed earlier this year. Prior to the February order, Mayor Copeland ordered residents out of the complex in June 2016, due to the extremely high levels of lead found in the yards of homes in the complex. The lead levels were exposed through an investigation of the complex by the EPA in 2014, five years after the site had been designated as a federal Superfund site (hazardous waste disposal site) in 2009.

Copeland has not released his plan for the redevelopment of the West Calumet site, despite the EPA's pressing for more information. So far, the mayor's office has stated that after the demolition, the site should be cleaned up to be prepared for residential use, so that the site will be ready for whatever type of purpose that the city wishes to pursue. The EPA's continued pressure on the mayor's office for information has resulted in a feud between the mayor and the EPA.

The only hint as to what the mayor may be planning to use the site for comes from a public meeting held in 2012 in which the EPA discussed a cleanup date and potential cleanup plans with city officials and the mayor's office. Three proposals for cleanup plans were put forth by the EPA: to do nothing; to remove only the top layers of soil, which would allow the residents of West Calumet to stay in place for the vast majority of the cleanup; or to remove all soil at the site down to the level of the native sand, requiring the demolition of the complex and relocation of its residents for a prolonged period. During the meeting, Mayor Copeland pressed for the third plan, which would require the demolition of the complex, stating that the area "would be prime for development."

The West Calumet Housing Complex was built between 1970-1973 by the East Chicago Housing Authority (ECHA) on the site of the demolished Anaconda Lead Products facility. The complex was built on top of rubble and waste that was buried in the ground after the facility was demolished sometime in the 1960s. Anaconda's parent company, USS Lead, continued to operate a secondary smelter to the north of the site into the 1980s.

The decision to build the West Calumet Housing Project came in 1968, when the city was in need of the construction of a public housing complex in order to keep the flow of federal money coming in to East Chicago. Because the city was heavily industrialized, available land for the construction of such a projects was scarce, and the city opted to build public housing on vacant lands near industrial sites and "less than desirable residential areas."

In 1976, Benjamin Lesniak, director of the ECHA, testified in a lawsuit against the mayor of East Chicago, John Nicosia, and various building companies involved in the construction of West Calumet, as a plea bargain for fraud charges. Lesniak described the various

backroom deals that transpired in the course of the contracting and building of the complex. Lesniak himself had accepted over \$100,000 in bribes for the contracting of the complex to various friends and associates. One such bribe, for the demolition of a defunct lead smelter facility, was revealed in the course of the proceedings. This was the only mention during the trial of the fact that the West Calumet complex had been built on an area that was used for processing lead.

The revelations of the trial show that the possibility of lead contamination at the complex was well known by city officials since before its construction had even begun. The first soil tests for lead in the area were conducted in 1985, long after the trial, the same year that US Rep. Pete Visclosky asked the EPA to initiate a hazardous waste removal action at the USS Lead site under the Superfund law. He noted that the site was in disrepair and contaminant data were accessible to the general public. In December 1985, USS Lead ceased operations. Tests of the soil around the area of the facility on 1985 revealed lead levels in a range of 100 to 11,000 parts per million (ppm). The EPA's standard for acceptable levels of lead in soil is 120 ppm.

Despite evidence of elevated lead levels in the soil, no serious effort to clean the soil in the area was made until 1992, after USS Lead's parent company, Sharon Steel Corp., declared bankruptcy. The same year, the site was proposed by the EPA to be placed on the National Priorities list to be granted EPA funding for the removal of toxic substances. Placement on the National Priorities list was not granted. Instead, the EPA entered into an agreement with USS Lead's new parent company, Mueller Holdings Corp., to take financial responsibility for the cleanup of the site under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).

In 1997, tests of residents in the area revealed elevated blood levels in children, and on average, blood lead levels were found to be three times higher than the Indiana state average. Soil samples were also conducted that year, showing levels of lead in the soil that were acceptable by EPA standards. However, the tests were found to be flawed, because they were conducted in areas furthest away from the smelter facility. Cleanup of the site under the RCRA was minimal, consisting mainly of covering bags of lead dust, and a lapse of authority in the RCRA led to its re-proposal as a Superfund site in 2009, which was granted.

In 2014, the EPA extensively tested the soil in the yards of the West Calumet residences, after the mayor had asked for the soil to be removed down to the native sand. The tests revealed elevated levels of lead in the soil in over 90 percent of the yards, with one yard recorded to have as much as 91,000 ppm. Tests conducted later in July 2016 showed similar findings.

In spite of various findings by the EPA that the residential area on and around the demolished facility contained elevated levels of lead, neither local, state or federal governments officials have shown any real consideration for the safety of the residents until now. This brings into question the mayor's intention for the demolition of the complex under the governor's issuance of the executive order.

Copeland first ordered residents out of the complex in July 2016. Residents were provided with counseling to help them find low-income housing units in the area to which they would be able to relocate temporarily while the site was cleaned. Still, the EPA determined that the relocation of residents was unnecessary, as cleaning for the top layers of soil only required residents to move into hotel rooms for a few days, which the EPA had agreed to pay for. However, the mayor pressed ahead with his demolition agenda. The

areas to which residents had been slotted to relocate also bring into question the justification for demolishing the complex due to residential safety concerns. Some of the residents have been relocated to the notorious Altgeld Gardens of Chicago's south side, known as the "toxic doughnut" for its similar history of contamination by industrial sites as well as nearby landfills.

Because of the dearth of affordable housing in East Chicago, residents have been forced to move to other areas of the state, and in some cases, across state lines into Chicago, Illinois. Residents who are forced to move far from the complex risk losing their employment and schooling for their children due to lack of available transportation. City officials told residents that they would provide transportation to and from children's schools if they were relocated outside of their district, but residents have pointed out that nothing has been put into writing to guarantee such a measure. For those forced to move across state lines, the need to have to reapply for health, food, and other benefits will severely impact the quality of life.

Residents protested the relocation efforts outside of the mayor's office on March 22. They raised concerns about the lead contamination of their homes, but wished to be allowed to remain until June 28 so their children could finish the school year. At the protest, a letter requesting an extension of the move-out deadline was delivered to the ECHA's executive director, Tia Cauley, through the window of her car as she drove away. The letter was later found on the ground.

It was later reported that appliances and furniture left in lead-contaminated homes were up for sale on the ECHA website as recently as April 6. Items from the complex are still listed on the website, for sale "as is." The items for sale are likely to be contaminated with lead, and pose a health threat to those who come into contact with them.

The residents of the West Calumet Housing Complex have faced continuous attacks on their quality of life since the buildings were constructed on lead-contaminated soil in the 1970s. There was no effort made to clean lead out of the soil before the construction began. The city was aware of the lead contamination, but made no real effort to protect the residents or clean up the soil on the site in the years that followed.

The relocation of residents to other areas affected by harmful contamination shows that there was no real concern for residents in declaring the order for demolition, despite Copeland's lauding of Holcomb's order in February as a display of "compassion for our residents." The question remains for what purpose the demolition is really intended to serve.

The residents of the West Calumet Housing Complex have the right to live in homes free of lead and other environmental contaminants, with accessibility to their jobs and public schools for their children. However, the actions of state and local governments in removing the residents from their homes illustrate their lack of concern for the people living on the lead-contaminated site. The financial interests they wished to pursue through the defrauding of government funding are their priority.



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