

Town hall fails to ease concerns over industrial toxins found in Parchment, Michigan drinking water

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Several hundred concerned residents from Parchment, Michigan and the surrounding areas crowded into a local church for a town hall meeting Tuesday evening called in response to the toxic chemicals recently found in the public water supply.

Last Thursday evening, residents of the community of 1,800 just north of the city of Kalamazoo were alerted that the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality had found per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in excess of 1400 parts per trillion (ppt), twenty times higher than the advisory level determined by the EPA.

A panel of local and state officials fielded carefully selected questions at Tuesday's town hall. The panel included representatives from Kalamazoo County Health and Community Service Department, Michigan Department of Environment Quality, Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, Kalamazoo Public Services, and Kalamazoo Township police. The mayor of Parchment and the supervisor of Cooper Township, which is also affected, were also present.

Officials explained that the elevated levels of PFAS had been found in water coming from the three ground-water wells from which the City of Parchment draws its water. Those wells were sealed, and water was pumped from the nearby City of Kalamazoo water system in an effort to "flush out" the toxic water from the Parchment water mains.

There was no long-term solution offered, although some officials speculated that the City of Kalamazoo will most likely become the permanent water source for Parchment.

The panel acknowledged that Kalamazoo too has found PFAS in Kalamazoo water at levels between 2

and 19 ppt. The officials assured residents that these levels are not of concern since they are well below the 70-PPT advisory level.

The panel did not address, or even acknowledge, a report by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a public health agency within the Department of Health and Human services, which was suppressed by the Trump administration earlier this year which suggested lowering the advisory level to 7 to 11 PPT.

The meeting itself was tightly controlled. The time allotted for residents to ask their own questions was held to 45 minutes. There was also a 45-minute period for questions which had to be written on cards and submitted. Only a small selection of these questions were asked.

Many residents wanted to know about the long-term health ramifications of PFAS exposure, and how these health issues might be addressed. The health officials could answer the former question: PFAS is linked to kidney, thyroid, and liver disease, as well as maternity and developmental problems. To the latter question, the officials could provide no helpful answer. "This is an opportunity for you to start a conversation with your personal physician," one official declared.

The panel did not provide any satisfactory answers to many other questions: "How long have the PFAS been in the water?" "Who will pay for all of this?" "Will property values be affected?" "Can I eat my home-grown vegetables?" "Are private wells affected?"

During the short time for public comment, the anger of residents was audible. One resident stated plainly, "Everyone knows this is from the Crown Vantage Paper Mill," which elicited spontaneous applause from

the crowd. PFAS was used to coat paper produced at the Crown Vantage plant until it was shuttered in 2000. A possible source for the chemical is a landfill near the plant which was used for dumping fly ash and other waste from Crown Vantage.

The crowd also applauded a resident who objected to the panel's use of the term “emerging contaminant” for PFAS. She noted that 3M and Dupont have been aware of the dangerous health effects of PFAS for decades.

Laura, who has grown up in Parchment, told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the uncertainty with which she and many other residents had after leaving the meeting. “As young as I am, I have had so many medical issues. But do I say that it came from the water? I don’t know. But can I speculate that it probably has? Because you don’t end up on life support at a young age for nothing, unless it’s a car accident or something, and mine wasn’t.”

Cody Angel from the political group Michigan Demands Action Against Contamination also spoke with the WSW. He connected the PFAS water poisoning to the crumbling state of infrastructure across the United States. “First it was our roads, and now it’s our core infrastructure that’s meant to protect our public health. It is a failure of the federal government, and it’s a failure of the state government. We have to put forward better infrastructure with our most critical resource that we have—water.”

Angel also responded to the refrain from politicians that there is no money to pay for infrastructure. “It’s people’s lives. It doesn’t matter about money at this point. We live in a society where we put profit over people. And that’s a problem. Until we can reprioritize our set goals, there will be no money for public health. We have to fundamentally change the way we operate.”



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