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Lang orders Keith review

Team to determine if school should open

By AARON NICODEMUS, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — Mayor Scott W. Lang has commissioned a pair of environmental consulting companies, led by a former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official, to review the Keith Middle School site and determine if the school should be allowed to open.

The companies will review all data and information regarding the cleanup of environmental contamination at the school and return to Mayor Lang with recommendations.

Blue Wave Strategies, project manager for the review, is headed by John DeVillars, former head of the EPA's New England Region from 1993 to 2000 and former Secretary of the Environment under Gov. Michael Dukakis. Blue Wave was one of seven companies that considered purchasing the former NStar site on the city's waterfront, but did not put in a bid.

TRC Environmental Corp. will do the "critical review" of what has been done at the site, and recommend cleanup solutions and monitoring. TRC is headed by Paul Arnold, the company's brownfields project manager, who has done environmental consulting on industrial brownfields sites for the city in the past. TRC has conducted large-scale assessments of human health on Superfund, brownfields and other contaminated sites, according to a press release from Mayor Lang.

The environmental review is the latest set of eyes to scrutinize the Keith Middle School project. The state treasurer's office is already conducting a financial audit of the project. At a cost of nearly \$70 million, the new Keith is more than \$21 million over budget.

Driving up the cost of Keith is environmental contamination at the site. A former dump site, it contains polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), as well as heavy metals and volatile organic compounds. Tons of soil were removed from the site and trucked to out-of-state landfills, while a non-permeable barrier and 3 feet of clean soil was placed over the entire site.

But some in the community, particularly neighbors of the Keith site and some concerned parents of Keith students, have raised objections and wondered if the cleanup had been thorough enough. Mayor Lang made both the cost overruns and the environmental issues at the new Keith project a campaign issue.

Yesterday, he said he would follow any and all recommendations of the environmental review.

"Whatever it costs to continue to clean it up, we will do," said Mayor Lang at a press conference yesterday. "One way or the other, this school will be cleaned up in a way that people will be comfortable with it. I want to make sure that it is absolutely safe."

When asked what Mayor Lang said he wanted, Mr. DeVillars answered, "He's been very clear with us that he wants an honest and thorough evaluation. He has told us he wants the unvarnished truth."

TRC Corp. will be paid \$22,000, while Blue Wave Strategies will be paid \$17,000. Mayor Lang said the funds will come from the money being paid to Mount Vernon Group, the Stoneham architecture firm that designed Keith

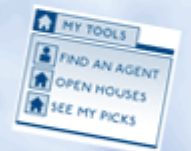
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Middle School.

The city will hold a public meeting July 12 to share information that has developed over the last few months about Keith Middle School, New Bedford High School and Paul Walsh Field, and this information will also be provided to the review teams.

The teams will report back to the city by Aug. 1, and a public hearing will be held to discuss their recommendations. Mr. DeVillars said the teams will not do any new testing, but instead will review existing data and meet with those responsible for the cleanup and capping of the Keith site.

Seven employees from TRC and four from Blue Wave will participate in the environmental review of the Keith site.

Best-case scenario, Mayor Lang said, would be that the environmental review will find that the school site was properly cleaned and capped, there is no risk to students and staff, and the school will be allowed to open as scheduled in September.

Worst-case scenario is that the site will be declared a continuing public health hazard that will require more extensive cleanup work, delaying the opening of the school and forcing school officials to use the old Keith Junior High School building for a year or longer. School Superintendent Michael E. Longo said the School Department has contingency plans in place for any possibility, and that the scheduled demolition of the old Keith building would not go forward until the new school is opened.

The new Keith Middle School was built on the former McCoy Field on Hathaway Boulevard, a former city dump site. Before construction began, officials knew that the site contained PCBs, as well as heavy metals and volatile organic compounds. The state Department of Environmental Protection oversaw the initial phase.

But during the testing, concentrations of PCBs above 50 parts per million were discovered at the site. That elevated the site's status to monitoring under the federal Toxic Substance Control Act, meaning that the EPA took over as lead agency.

Throughout the process, both DEP and EPA delegated the actual cleanup and testing to the city's environmental consultant, The Beta Group. As the licensed site professional, The Beta Group oversaw the testing, cleanup and construction of the cap.

The project is now \$21 million over its original budget, approaching \$70 million in total costs. Two other new middle schools, Roosevelt and Normandin, were built for \$36 million in 2001 and \$40 million in 2003, respectively. On those two projects, the state School Building Assistance Bureau reimbursed the city for 90 percent of the costs. In the case of Keith, the reimbursement for the cost overruns is still not certain.

Mayor Lang has laid the blame for the choice of the site and overruns squarely in the lap of former Mayor Frederick M. Kalisz Jr. and former City Solicitor Matthew J. Thomas, despite the fact that the School Committee approved the site and the School Department oversaw the finances of the project.

"The mayor and the city solicitor ran this project," Mayor Lang said after the press conference. "The School Committee made its decisions based on the information it received. Contractors were told, 'This is the way it's going to be done.'"


"The mayor always said he built the schools," Mr. Longo, the school superintendent, said. "The School Committee was responsible for educational specifications, and for site selection. They made a decision based on the information they had. They didn't envision it would have the issues that ended up happening."

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