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## Keith 'safe to open'

### Panel of environmental experts unveils findings

By AARON NICODEMUS, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — A "blue-ribbon" team of environmental experts has declared the new Keith Middle School safe to open, confirming what the former mayoral administration and federal regulators have been saying for years.

The report, put together by a former EPA official and a nationally known environmental firm, concludes that the cleanup and capping plan proposed by former Mayor Frederick M. Kalisz Jr. and approved by state and federal environmental officials "was appropriately designed to protect public health and the environment by preventing exposure to contamination that remains buried at the Keith Middle School site."

The report deals solely with environmental concerns and does not address the mounting cost of the project.

"Our conclusion after almost three months of work is that the school will be safe to open, once work is done and a long-term monitoring plan is in place," said former EPA official John DeVillars, who led the team of experts who wrote the report.

That said, he noted, "We found serious deficiencies in selecting the site, and in implementing the remediation. It cost the city a great deal of money and a great deal of concern that were unnecessary."

The Kalisz cleanup plan, approved by the EPA, was to remove the most contaminated soil and cover the rest with a thin cap and three feet of clean soil. That plan had been criticized extensively by some in the community, including Mayor Scott W. Lang, for not going far enough to protect the public from the polychlorinated biphenyls, heavy metals and other contaminants still contained in the soil.

But the report, beyond calling for more extensive monitoring of the cap and air quality inside the school, does not suggest one substantive area where the original cleanup and capping plan should be altered or improved.

The brand-new Keith Middle School, built on a former city burn dump site, has been ready to open since July. The school has remained closed while an environmental team hired by Mayor Lang assessed whether it is safe. At a press conference yesterday at City Hall, the experts unveiled their report.

The report states that regular monitoring and maintenance of the school is crucial to keeping it safe far into the future, and is critical of the Kalisz administration for not communicating effectively with the community.

The environmental experts who wrote the report are Blue Wave Strategies, Mr. DeVillars' Boston-based environmental consulting firm, and TRC Environmental, a national risk assessment firm. Mr. DeVillars was once head of the Northeast region of the EPA and oversaw many of the EPA regulators who approved the Keith plan. Blue Wave and TRC were paid approximately \$39,000 combined for their assessment.

The report lays out numerous problems with the implementation of the capping plan, from inadequate management of contaminated soil leaving the site to problems with erosion control, from driving fence posts through the cap to tearing open the cap accidentally with a bulldozer. But the report concludes "that those issues did not compromise the integrity of the remedy."

"In addition, they are unlikely to have exposed the public to health risks during construction since they were addressed relatively quickly and did not result in prolonged exposure to any significant levels of contamination," the report says.

Mayor Lang said the school will not open until all of the work at the site is completed, which should take six to eight weeks. That work includes removing some contaminated soil, repairing part of the cap, cleaning up contaminated wetlands behind the school, and creating a clean utility corridor along Hathaway Boulevard.

The earliest the school can open is after Christmas break, he said. He promised that the school will be open to students in this school year, which ends in June.

The environmental review of Keith was done, at least in part, to answer criticisms of the project by Wasted Away, a neighborhood group that has consistently criticized the project.

Group members had mixed reactions to the report.

Mark A. Howland, who has acted as an environmental consultant for Wasted Away and who is a candidate for state representative, called the report a "rubber stamp."

"I'm not impressed with this report," Mr. Howland said. "It's basically a rubber stamp that the EPA and DEP did a wonderful job, and I don't think they did a wonderful job. This basically says that safe enough is good enough, and I just don't agree with it."

Group member Eddie Johnson said he accepts the report even though he would have liked Wasted Away to review it before it was released.

"I do believe (Keith) is safe enough to open. You can't keep the old

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Keith and the new Keith. I think they looked hard at it and they've done what they needed to do," he said.

The founder of Wasted Away, Brian Woolley, said he will withhold comment until he reads the report and discusses its findings with Mayor Lang.

At yesterday's press conference, Mayor Lang continued his criticism of the Keith project, which he had warned might not be safe when he campaigned for mayor last year.

"The community was led down a path that cost the city an awful lot of time, and awful lot of money, and an awful lot of heartache," he said. "This was a betrayal of the trust of everyone in this city."

The city will have to remain vigilant about monitoring and maintenance at the site, long after the current administration has left office, Mayor Lang said.

"We will be taking a very bad decision and spending an awful lot of time and money correcting it," he said. "It will be like monitoring a mine."

Asked whether the report vindicated the Kalisz administration's long-held mantra that the school would be safe, Mayor Lang responded, "God help him if it wasn't."

Contacted yesterday, former Mayor Kalisz said despite what has happened at Keith, he is proud of the school and for his role in building it.

"It is the third leg of the educational plan that we put together," he said. "I'm proud of what we contributed to this city's future."

After reading a copy of the report, Mr. Kalisz said he felt vindicated by the report's findings.

"The integrity of the (cleanup) plan, subject to the issues that arose in the latter days, the integrity of the plan was never compromised," Mr. Kalisz said. "That has been repeatedly pointed out in the report."






The report criticized the site, and Mr. Kalisz said that if forced to make the decision again, he would not have changed his mind.

"Our decision was based on the parameters we knew at the time," he said. "The city had an obligation to address that site. The city will be faced with decisions like this in the future, and maybe we will have learned something."

Mayor Lang has contended the Keith project, now tabbed to cost \$69.6 million by school officials, will cost \$75 million when all of the bills come in. The overruns at Keith have also stopped an extensive plan to build five new elementary schools, as the city has requested that the state reimbursement money that would have paid for three of those schools be directed to fund Keith's overruns.

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