

HK Porter Site Clean-Up Continues

Cleanup at the old H.K. Porter site is about to become very visible.

After years of testing and work inside the buildings, crews will be working this summer to remove and replace contaminated soil at neighboring properties and dig up a 40,000-gallon storage tank.

Exactly when that work will commence has not yet been pinned down, says Bryn Keplinger, director of Community Development and Redevelopment for the City of Huntington.

“It will happen when they get the funds and when it's not too dry and too hot to grow grass,” he says. “But it will be this summer.”

“They” is the federal Environmental Protection Agency division based in Chicago, which has been working at the site since 2015 as part of its Emergency Response Program. Once this summer's work — which also includes closure of production water wells — is complete, the emergency cleanup will also be complete, Keplinger says. The work may then be taken over by another area of the EPA, he adds.

The site is contaminated with asbestos, lead, and benzene, along with other materials used during the plant's 100-year history. Opened in 1919 as the Rapid Rim Company and going through several changes in ownership and name, the plant was known as Friction Materials Company when it ceased operations in 1999. Under its various names — which included Asbestos Manufacturing Company (AMCO), Thermoid Rubber Company, and from 1954 to 1986 H.K. Porter — the factory's workforce grew from an initial 65 people to 311 by 1948.

Over the years, those employees used lead and asbestos to manufacture linings for automotive parts including brakes and clutches, also using benzene in the manufacturing process. All three are known or suspected carcinogens. Later, a new owner hauled in still more hazardous materials from closed facilities across the Midwest.

By 2014, the property had back taxes of \$700,000, and the City of Huntington was able to gain control of the site and begin a lengthy cleanup, quickly demolishing eight of the 10 buildings on the 11.7-acre site on Sabine Street. The EPA and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management got involved the following year.

“More has happened in the five years since the city got control of the site with regard to the cleanup of contamination” than over the previous 95 years, Keplinger says.

In addition to the demolition of eight buildings, work has included environmental testing to determine the level of contaminants in the soil, air, and groundwater, as well as in the buildings. Hazardous materials have been removed from the site.

“To date, federal spending at the site by the EPA since 2015 has eclipsed \$900,000, with more to be done,” he says. The EPA is cleared to spend a total of \$1.3 million before it must seek additional funding.

The city's costs have totaled about \$234,000, money that was spent on environmental testing, building demolition, legal fees, and other costs, Keplinger says.

Keplinger met with neighborhood residents March 21 to explain this summer's projects, which include removing and replacing yards in properties adjacent to the plant that have tested positive for contaminants that migrated from the factory. That will include digging up and disposing of six to 12 inches of soil, replacing it with new topsoil, and planting grass. Affected residents have been notified.

Some soil on the factory site will also be removed.

A 40,000-gallon underground storage tank on the factory property, which was used as part of a solvent recovery system, will also be removed this summer.

In addition, several production water wells on the site will be closed to protect the aquifer.

What happens after that has yet to be decided as the city, IDEM and EPA continue to discuss next steps. One priority for the city is to demolish the two remaining buildings on the site.

“The sooner we can get the site leveled and cleared, the better it will be,” Keplinger says. “That's our eventual goal. But this is a marathon, not a sprint. We've made significant progress on this place the past five years.”

Once the buildings are down, environmental testing will need to be done to determine if the ground underneath is contaminated. Any future use of the site is still undetermined.



Workers from Quality Environmental Solutions, a United States Environmental Protection Agency Contractor, clean out one of the several dust collection baghouses at the former H.K. Porter site so that it may be removed during an earlier phase of the cleanup.



An area of the main factory floor at the former H.K. Porter site is cordoned off in preparation for United States Environmental Agency contractors to abate asbestos and other hazardous materials during an earlier phase of the cleanup.