

Chemical releases concern neighbors

by Diana Diamond
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Neighbors along Chimalus Drive in Palo Alto are fuming about toxic chemicals that have been released by a nearby manufacturer of power supplies for high-tech equipment.

Richard Placone, a resident on Chimalus Drive, has filed a formal complaint with the Palo Alto City Council for its “failure to take proper actions to safeguard the neighborhood in which I live from the threat of dangerous, life-threatening toxic fumes and substances.

The chemicals were released by CPI, or Communications and Power Industries, at 607 and 811 Hansen Way; the site was once the corporate headquarters of Varian Associates.

The Santa Clara County of Environmental Health is trying to determine whether reports submitted by CPI on April 16 and May 20 addressing CPI's plans for improved control of toxics meet county regulations. That determination will be made in the next few weeks, said Nicole Pullman, project manager.

Placone, in his letter to the council, said he had received a letter asking him if he wants to be put on a notification list when CPI's sensors indicate a toxic gas release has occurred. “Is that supposed to make me feel comfortable and safe in my own home?” he asked.

Another neighbor, Art Liberman, who also lives on Chimalus, said the neighbors have been concerned since 2006. “We are still upset and outraged on how this situation arose. People were not made aware of the problem.”

Human error

Liberman said CPI stores its hazardous wastes at the rear of the 811 Hansen parcel, which is less than 100 feet from residents. Two of the spills, he said, were the result of human error.

The first accidental release of toxic fumes occurred in early 2006 when a plume of nitric acid gas spread over the Barron Park neighborhood, causing one resident cleaning his gutters to suddenly feel sick and get off the roof before he fell down.

The second leak was when a delivery truck spilled hydrochloric acid in the parking lot of CPI. That spill was contained.

And on May 20, just two weeks ago, CPI leaked 40 to 50 gallons of chemically tainted water into the store drain when a waste neutralization tank overflowed because of a malfunctioning sensor. The storm drain empties into Matadero Creek and the San Francisco Bay.

In his letter, Placone said “CPI, of course, promises to take precautions to safeguard the chemicals and the manufacturing process...they clearly do not belong in or near a densely populated residential neighborhood.

More sensors

Amanda Mogin, director of investor relations at CPI, confirmed that only a wall separates CPI from nearby residences, but said the grounds are monitored 24x7, and a guard is always on duty of make sure there are no leaks.

“We have sensors all over the place,” Mogin said. “We are now evaluating whether to add more sensors or upgrade the existing ones.”

Varian began its operations in Palo Alto at the Hansen site in 1962, and CPI was one of the departments in the company. In the mid-90's, CPI was one of the first businesses Varian spun out, and the spin-off moved to San Carlos. In 2005, it decided to move back to the Varian site on Hansen and renovate the building but did not need a new use permit, since it was still considered an arm of Varian and was grandfathered in, Mogin said.

Placone pointed out that CPI recently asked the city to increase its activities and the amount of toxic chemicals it could store on the site by 25 percent. Neighbors objected, but the council agreed to a 10 percent increase. City Attorney Gary Baum said at the time that the city could be subject to legal action if it was interfering with CPI's business.

CPI provides power devices for a number of different industries, half of which are governmental contracts and half are communications systems, Mogin said. “For example, we are the power source of Varian Medical's new linear accelerator. The company is also the source of power for big satellite dishes.

“We need a very high level of vacuum, and to do that, we have to pull out a lot of chemicals found in products to reach that high level. That's where the hazardous wastes occur,” Mogin said.

\$20,000 fine

The company had prepared a risk management plan that previously was found to be insufficient, and submitted two subsequent reports this year to the Department of Environmental Health, Pullman said. However, in 2007 CPI paid the city a \$20,000 fine for the toxic chemical leak in 2006.

Liberman said this weekend that CPI has voluntarily reduced the amount of toxic materials it stores on its site by 40 percent.