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PUBLIC HEALTH

Toxic sites near schools targeted

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At least 20 schools in the Buffalo Niagara region are located within a half-mile of hazardous waste sites, and the children who attend them are in danger of developing health problems as a result, according to a new study that will be released locally today.

Environmentalists will meet at noon today near the Lewiston-Porter Central School District campus, which is about a mile from what local activists have dubbed the "toxic triangle" in northern Niagara County.

"We're calling for action to eliminate toxic hazards from school environments," said Mike Schade, Western New York director in Buffalo of Citizens Environmental Coalition, an organization of more than 110 member groups representing 13,000 individuals. "We obviously can't shut down existing schools, but we can ask that hazardous sites be cleaned up and make sure new schools are not built near such areas."

Seven schools in Niagara County are within half a mile of potentially hazardous sites, said Schade. In Erie County, there are 13 such schools, 10 of them in Buffalo.

Environmentalists will release detailed maps of the schools and the nearby hazardous sites at the meeting in Lewiston today.

The local initiative is part of a national grassroots campaign identifying schools located within half a mile of federal or state Superfund sites — former industrial or commercial areas deemed to be such a health risk they are eligible for federal or state cleanup funds. The half-mile criterion was chosen because that's often walking distance for schoolchildren, Schade said.

The campaign is being coordinated in five states named in a report compiled over the past year by several environmental groups. The Childproofing Our Communities Campaign identifies public schools near Superfund sites in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan and California.

"While there are laws that compel children to attend schools, there are no guidelines or laws in place that protect the school population from environmental health and safety risks," Schade said.

With school populations growing nationwide — 37 new schools are to be built in New York State in the next year — the coalition wants state or federal guidelines that prohibit schools from being

built close to contaminated sites.

"Our focus is on new schools and protecting the health of children in the future," Schade said.

The campaign has attracted the attention of former Niagara Falls resident Lois Gibbs, who spearheaded a movement 23 years ago to expose the chemical dangers in the city's Love Canal area.

Hundreds of residents were evacuated from that east side neighborhood after toxic sludge began bubbling up in people's back yards and basements, the residue of chemical waste dumped in the open Love Canal in the 1940s and 1950s by Hooker Chemical Co.

"We knew there were a lot of schools being built on or near toxic sites, but we had no idea the numbers would be this staggering," said Gibbs. "Schools should be a place for learning, not a place that makes kids sick."

According to the national survey, more than 600,000 children in the five states surveyed go to schools that were built on or near toxic waste sites, increasing their chances of developing various diseases linked to environmental pollutants, including cancer.

News wire services contributed to this report.