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City commission hears update on Hercules cleanup

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Hercules' efforts to clean up three superfund sites in Brunswick are moving at "an accelerated pace," representatives of the company told city commissioners Wednesday.

Mark Johnson, with the local branch of the Gilbert Harrell law firm, and Greg Roush, a consultant on industrial environmental issues with GeoSyntec, gave the presentation on behalf of Hercules.

Roush said Hercules opened the a pine resin products plant the 1920s, well before the environmental regulations that exist today to prevent pollution.



"This corrective action plan is to address those historic (pollutant) releases from many years ago," Roush said.

Efforts to clean up three contaminated sites — the plant now owned by Pinova, the Terry Creek/Hercules outfall ditch and the former Hercules 009 landfill — have been ongoing for around 20 years, he said. At the plant, Hercules has completed remediation of soil under the former location of a toxaphene storage tank farm, but several more areas of contaminated soil and groundwater remain. Toxaphene is an insecticide that was banned in the U.S. in 1990.

Since last year, over 4,000 soil samples across the plant's grounds have been tested, he said, revealing six new candidates for cleanup based on levels of toxaphene contamination.

Contaminants in the groundwater are spreading out — creating an underground “plume” of polluted groundwater.

“Groundwater moves at different rates across the site. Across 17, it's moving maybe 40 to 50 feet per year. The pollutants move slower,” he said.

Groundwater moves maybe five feet a year as the ground gets flatter around the plant, he said.

A method is in use to treat the groundwater called a biowall. Injection wells inject biological compounds into the ground to treat groundwater by removing contaminants as they come into contact with the biowall, Roush explained.

It's impossible to treat every molecule of contaminated water, he said, but the biowall process allows Hercules to take immediate action to cut off the source of contamination and stop it from getting worse. Further, he said natural compounds and microorganisms in the underground aquifer can clean up some of the contamination without human intervention.

“You just can't overload it, so we're trying to knock that mass down so the aquifer can do that itself,” Roush said.

He gave the commission a timeline for cleanup efforts through 2023 and said Hercules plans to hold public information sessions annually to talk about the cleanup efforts. A new corrective action permit to clean up chloroform contamination on the plant site is under review by the state Environmental Protection Division, he said, and a public comment period ends in November.

On Sept. 29, the EPD will host a drop-in question and answer session from 3-5 p.m. and a public hearing and presentation from 6:30-9 p.m. at the College of Coastal Georgia's Stembler Theater.

The groundwater is also contaminated with benzene, a component of gas and crude oil.

"There are no magic bullets to make this happen faster. It's hard work, there's a lot of science involved and you have to work with the (federal Environmental Protection Agency) and EPD."

Despite that, progress in cleaning up the sites is moving at "an accelerated pace," he said.

More information is available at herculesbrunswick.com.

Brunswick Mayor Cosby Johnson asked for an explanation of the effect contamination has on the flora and fauna.

"It's wildlife that ingests those toxins, so I was just wondering if there's been any tests," Johnson said.

Roush said fish in nearby waterways are tested every two years. They are unsafe to eat, but toxins in fish tissue have been on the decline for decades and cleanup efforts underway now will, hopefully, speed up the decline.

In late 1990s, a broad study looked at environmental contamination and its effects on people, Johnson said, and found there was not an "overwhelming impact" on residents.

City Commissioner Julie Martin asked when the cleanup might be complete. Roush said it's going to take a while, and could not promise a clear timeline.

In other business, commissioners voted to approve an alcohol license for Lotto Mart 341 LLC, allowing alcohol sales in a convenience store at 2432 Newcastle St.

Deep Patel filed for the application, but his cousin spoke for him because he was not comfortable speaking English. He said the store would sell groceries, lottery tickets and fishing supplies due to its proximity to the Brunswick Landing Marina.

Commissioners deferred the license request at their last meeting because the owner had not met with nearby residents in the Midtown Neighborhood Planning Assembly.

Patel's cousin said they attended the NPA meeting on 12th and discussed plans to sell alcohol.

Commissioners also questioned the owner's ability to effectively manage the business, bringing up a recent citation at another store owned by the same family of companies for selling alcohol to someone who was underage.

Some changes were made internally to closely monitor alcohol sales. The person who sold the alcohol told Patel the buyer looked old enough and was reprimanded for not checking their ID, he said.

Later in the meeting, Jess Brown, a stormwater specialist with the University of Georgia's Marine Extension office, gave the commission an update on a stormwater drainage upgrade and improvement plan called Rethinking Runoff.

City Public Works Director Garrow Alberson said a state grant is funding the plan's development.

The intent of the plan is to create a list of "shovel-ready" projects, or those that can be quickly designed and completed, in flood-prone areas.

It's one of two such plans in the state, she said, and Brunswick is already getting attention for working on it, she said.

City Commissioner Felicia Harris was glad to hear drainage projects on Albany Street and the Riverside neighborhood are priorities after recent flooding.

"When things like that happen, people feel like they are forgotten," Harris said.

The plan is nearly ready for public release, said City Manager Regina McDuffie, and that the city government would begin publicizing the details in the near future.

Commissioners were also set to talk about new wayfinding signage around the city and whether to move forward with advertising a public hearing for an application to annex and rezone a property on U.S. 17, which would pave the way for a 216-unit apartment complex, but the meeting extended past The News' deadline.

On Tuesday it was reported that the commission would consider approving the request Wednesday night. The News apologizes for the error.