

**SAN FRANCISCO BAY / ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUE**  
**Campus Bay's toxic legacy coming to light**  
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**By Rebecca Rosen Lum, staff writer**

Shortly after she and her husband moved to Richmond, Stephanie Wilson strapped their 8-month-old daughter, Lily, to her bicycle for a jaunt through the neighboring property -- a vast expanse of open space that encompasses a 17-acre marsh.

"It's such a beautiful spot," she said. "We stopped to watch the tractor."

Within weeks, she learned that the 85-acre Campus Bay property -- site of the longtime Stauffer Chemical Company, later Zeneca -- had been designated one of the state's most polluted. The tractor had been moving contaminated soil.

"We were oblivious until my husband attended the hearing at the UC Field Station," she said.

At that Nov. 6 hearing, called by Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, Trent Wilson heard the land characterized as a bubbling cauldron -- sodden with heavy metals, arsenic, DDT, PCBs and volatile organic compounds. He also heard about dubious cleanup methods launched without permits or public notice.

He learned, to his disbelief, that owners Simeon Cherokee Ventures -- Simeon Properties and Cherokee pension investments -- plan a 1,336-unit housing development there.

Zeneca closed up shop in 1997. Simeon bought the land reportedly for \$50 million, although neither company will confirm the figure.

The land is pocked with toxic hot spots from chemical production and dumping dating back to the late 1800s.

In 2002, the city gave its blessing to Simeon Properties for a sprawling research complex on the 28-acre former Western Research Center site -- no detailed environmental review required.

Since then, the bottom fell out of the bio-tech market, and Simeon turned to housing on the remaining 57 acres -- using the same permits for commercial development first approved by the City Council.

Communities for a Better Environment attorney Adrienne Bloch protested, noting that the property was considered so hazardous that federal health compensation is available to anyone who lived in the area as a child.

But city officials say the project can be done without compromising public health.

"The city's highest priority is the health, safety and public welfare of the people in our community," said Steve Duran, director of the Richmond Redevelopment Agency.

Simeon Properties CEO Russ Pitto said his company stepped into an existing plan for marsh remediation and a turf war between the water board and the Department of Toxic Substances Control.

"We inherited some history," he said.

What the city will gain is a mixed-use complex where there was once a blighted wasteland, and \$7 million in annual redevelopment money.

"This will be one of the highest quality communities in the Bay Area," he said. "We've won awards for our communities."

When previous owner ICI Americas tore down 47 buildings in 1999 -- chemical labs, pesticide manufacturing plants, storage tanks and cement staging slabs -- the resulting rubble consumed 3 acres. The dust rose into the air and covered neighboring businesses. The city permit was the size of an index card.

"There was no reference to chemical hazards, nothing," said Sherry Padgett, 52, who works at the nearby Kray Cabling Inc. and has spearheaded opposition to what she describes as a shoddy, dangerous cleanup operation. "It was all airborne and all downwind. We know nothing about it other than it was bad, bad, bad."

In June 2003, Padgett, a slim, youthful-looking blonde, developed chondrosarcoma, an extremely rare cancer of the cartilage. Several months later, a malignant tumor appeared in her thyroid gland, also quite rare. Two others formed soon thereafter, she said.

Her doctors told her it was "probable" that exposure to carcinogens are responsible.

"I come from a genetic background where we live to a very old age without health problems," she said. "I have never known illness."

In fact, several people who work in downwind businesses have developed life-threatening illness, including multiple cancers.

Wendel Brunner, Contra Costa County's director of public health, cautioned against making a correlation between the cleanup and the cancers, saying prolonged exposure to carcinogens must take place to be linked to an illness.

Still, the incidence is sobering. Bay Area Residents for Responsible Development conducted a door-to-door survey that revealed that on South 49th Street alone from April 2001 to March 2004, individuals were diagnosed with cancers of the bladder, prostate, thyroid and uterus, and with birth defects, chondroma, fatal pancreatitis, kidney problems, ovarian cysts and severe headaches.

During that time period, contaminated soil was excavated and propelled into the air, coating cars, streets and buildings with dust.

Neighbors say they have had to maintain relentless pressure to get the most basic safety questions answered. They've lobbied elected officials and state agencies to more closely monitor the cleanup.

The group hammered at the California Environmental Protection Agency to transfer authority from the state's Regional Water Quality Control Board, which employs no toxicologists and does not involve the public in its process, to the much more stringent Department of Toxic Substances Control.

With the help of Hancock, they prevailed.

They expected toxics investigators to carefully gauge the state of the land and the risks before scheduling new cleanup efforts. But work restarted with no substantive changes.

"The concerns the residents have are understandable and I share them," Brunner said. "That kind of exposure shouldn't ever happen again."

Redevelopment agency official Duran said, "The most important thing we have now is clarity at the state regulatory level so that the city and other stakeholders can have confidence in the process and the decisions for which these state regulatory agencies are responsible."

With the remediation methods Simeon is using, toxic gases, some volatile, would be emitted for decades underneath the housing. A draft proposal shows fans installed in the basements to keep gases from building up.

"I'm not necessarily opposed to building homes on this site, but don't want it done until it's been thoroughly and carefully evaluated, using the top expertise from Cal EPA," Brunner said.

Brunner consulted on the Kaiser Shipyards cleanup before their transformation into the Marina Bay neighborhood. But Campus Bay is more complex, he said. The soil contains PCBs, heavy metals and pesticide manufacturing byproducts, including volatile organic compounds.

Plans call for 325,000 cubic yards of heavily contaminated soil to be placed into a massive hole, then sealed with a cement cap. The weight of the cap will likely push the toxic sludge down into the ground and the nearby marsh, further corrupting the waters of the Bay, said UC Berkeley professor of environmental science Claudia Carr.

In addition, the deep pilings necessary to support the high-rise apartment would break through the seal, she said.

Meanwhile, children arrive at 3 p.m. every weekday for an after-school program at the UC Field Station next door. The Aquatic Outreach Institute has school classes wading in the Stege Marsh to remove invasive weeds.

The Wilsons are moving to San Francisco. Like many area business owners, they are considering moving their company, too.

"I don't understand how, on one of the most toxic sites in California, a project like this got going," Trent Wilson said. "Had I known about this, I wouldn't even have driven my car through that area. It makes me wonder, what else are they hiding?"#

<http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/living/science/10288677.htm?1c>