

Community: Abandoned Radar Base, Soil Contamination and Cancer

In the 1960s there was an active U.S. Air Force military radar installation located on the outskirts of St. James. The radar installation was part of the NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) system that was built during the Cold War period. The installation was active for 35 year before it was closed in 1977. The site, covering an area of 12 square acres, has long since been abandoned. The Municipality of St. James owns the property. All that remains of the facility are some derelict concrete buildings, a paved road into the area and a chain link fence with locked access. Municipal developers have considered the site for various purposes, including a public park, condominium developments, and a new sewage treatment plant, among other uses. Public discussions regarding the development of the property have been contentious.

Recently, a citizen's committee has been formed because of concerns about PCB (poly chlorinated biphenyls) and other chemical contamination in the soil on the property, the relative proximity to ground water and household wells, and public perceptions the cancer rates in the area are higher than average. Many of the former radar base workers still live in the community. It is also well known that Agent Orange was used regularly in the compound area to remove vegetation. St. James receives its water supply from three ground water wells and a local lake. The lake is part of a larger watershed area that is used by local sport fishers and recreational swimmers. Two of the wells are located in the same water table zone located within one kilometre of the abandoned radar installation.

Recently a high profile Town Council member developed liver cancer. He was a non-military maintenance worker at the radar installation in the 1970s. He is leading the campaign to seek compensation for other workers who have also developed cancer. His high profile in the community and knowledge of the issues have made him the media "go-to person" for interviews on the suspected health problems arising from the radar base. Questions are being asked about the potential link between the radar base and illness in the community. The townspeople suspect local fish and other animal (like birds) have been contaminated. The citizen's committee is now lobbying for the town council to assure the public the drinking water is safe for public consumption.

A public meeting is being organized and you, as one of the prominent local physicians, have been invited to speak (as one of a panel of experts) on the potential link between the chemical contaminants at the based and the seemingly high rates of cancer locally.