Press Coverage

East Valley Tribune

September 5th, 2004

East Valley Tribune

For more information, contact:

Bradley Angel **(415) 248-5010**
Greenaction

E.V. hazardous waste plant raises concerns

By Angela D. Wagner

For nearly 30 years, a hazardous waste facility near the edge of southwest Chandler has been storing and processing tens of thousands of gallons of highly toxic material.

Despite documenting numerous violations, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has let the facility in the Gila River Indian Community operate under only an interim permit.

The agency has not pursued a new permit for Romic Environmental Technologies Corp. until recently, mainly, EPA officials say, because the tribe wouldn't sign the permit.

Now, EPA is again calling for public comment on a new permit for the facility, which wants to expand its operations. And this time the permit proposal is drawing fire from nearby residents in the fast-growing urban corridor, a tribal environmental group and environmental experts.

"What I am concerned about is health issues with a hazardous waste facility so nearby," said Connie Gartner, a resident of the Crestview Chateau condominiums near Frye and Kyrene roads. "If there is some kind of accident or leak we would be exposed."

Romic handles a variety of waste such as sludge, paint, Freon, batteries, fluorescent tubes, laboratory chemicals, oil, solvents, antifreeze, aerosol cans, acids and caustics as well as ignitable waste that is used to produce fuel.

The company is currently allowed to store up to 121,440 gallons of hazardous waste in 55-gallon drums in a warehouse. Another 13 tanks hold approximately 93,800 gallons of hazardous waste. Some of the chemicals are recycled and reused, such as antifreeze.

A recent EPA mailer sent to Chandler homes within a mile of the facility said "effects from Romic may include noise, visual effects, or air emissions containing hazardous constituents."

Howard Shanker, a Tempe environmental attorney who until recently was a member of a congressional oversight committee for the EPA, said the chemicals handled at Romic are extremely hazardous.

"When you are talking about acids, lead and solvents there is a whole range of problems," Shanker said.

"A number of solvents are carcinogens or suspected carcinogens," he said. "They get into the air and the groundwater. These are dangerous chemicals."

EPA, TRIBE AT ODDS
Shanker questioned why the EPA has taken so long to process a permit.

"I think what's of concern is that while EPA's dragging its feet the facility is continuing to operate," he said. "The fact that they are still operating under an interim permit with a history of violations should be of concern to the community and the

EPA. Hazardous waste encroaching on residential areas would be of huge concern to me if I lived in the area."

Steve Armann, an EPA spokesman in San Francisco, said the agency asked Romic to secure a new permit in 1992 and was prepared to approve it in 1994, but the Gila River tribe, the land owner, refused to sign it as the law requires because of the legal language.

He said the EPA and the tribe have been working for the last eight years to hammer out the language for the certification and still haven't come to an agreement.

Two years ago, EPA asked Romic to start the permit process again to gather more public input. As part of that application, the company has requested the ability to store and treat a larger quantity of waste.

Micki Schultz, an environmental engineer with Romic, said the company wants to add 17 tanks, most of which will be used for hazardous waste storage and processing. She said the facility is safe and that the company is performing a public service by recycling common chemicals.

"What the public isn't understanding is that the materials they use in their homes, like isopropyl alcohol, we can recycle and it's called a flammable hazardous waste," Schultz said. "We recycle things like paint thinner, which a lot of people have in their homes. What we do here is recycle things so they can be reused so they don't have to be disposed of."

Over the past 15 years, environmental officials have cited Romic for numerous violations, including improper storage of ignitable waste; inaccurate, missing or incomplete labels; incomplete inspection logs; and failure to comply with the air

emission inspection, monitoring and record keeping requirements. Armann said the company corrected those violations.

In several inspections between February 2002 and May 2004, the EPA found other violations, some of which have been corrected or dismissed, according to Armann. Others have not been resolved, he said.

Armann couldn't say specifically what the more recent violations were.

OPPOSITION MOUNTS

Lori Thomas-Luna, a founding member of the Gila River Alliance for a Clean Environment, said she has seen leaking barrels and has heard complaints from others on and off the reservation.

"I have been to the gate several times and have myself seen a 55-gallon drum with a brown substance dripping off the side of it," Thomas-Luna said. "Some of the contractors told me that besides the leaky barrels there are some that looked like they would pop because they were sitting in the sun."

Thomas Parker, a resident of the Silverbrush neighborhood near Kyrene and Frye, also had concerns. "There's no doubt in my mind that this should be looked at," he said. "If there's any kind of leak there will be thousands of cars driving through it before there's any kind of warning sent out, not to mention the residences and the casinos. I am definitely concerned about it."

The EPA and Romic don't know what area surrounding the facility could sustain possible damage or endure negative health effects if an accident did occur.

"We are in the process of conducting a human health risk assessment and evaluating worst-case scenarios," Armann said. He didn't know when that assessment would be completed.

Armann said a final decision on the permit isn't expected until the end of next year. If approved, the permit would be good for 10 years. If the application is denied, Romic would have to halt operations but could appeal.

© 2001 - 2004 Freedom Communications, Inc