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City Council Approves Pollution



The Harvard Crimson

By Jonathan F. Taylor, Contributing Writer

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An outpouring of public support for an ordinance to protect Cambridge residents from the hazards of asbestos culminated in a vote of unanimous approval at the City Council meeting last night.

The ordinance, written by the Alewife Study Group, the Public Health Office and City Councillor members, is the first of its kind in the nation. Its regulations are designed to fill in the gaps left by state and federal standards involving air pollution.

The issue was brought to the city's attention in 1995 with the proposed construction of a large industrial complex in North Cambridge, on a site that was found to have massive amounts of asbestos buried in its soil. The Alewife Study Group had pushed for an asbestos ordinance for the past four years.

The group, a coalition of active residents, had hoped to get the ordinance passed so that the proposed construction in North Cambridge will fall under this regulation, and succeeded last night.

"With this ordinance we're trying to lead the way, to be an example for other cities to follow," said Michael F. Nakagawa, a member of the Alewife Study Group Subcommittee for Public Health and Contamination Issues.

According to independent tests conducted under the behest of the Alewife Study Group in 1995, the site is estimated to have between 631,000 and 1.2 million pounds of asbestos buried in it.

The land is owned by the W. R. Grace chemical corporation, which plans to build large office buildings, a new world headquarters and a hotel on the site.

W. R. Grace has recently received negative publicity concerning environmental issues. The book and movie *A Civil Action* told the true story of chemical

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contamination in Woburn, Mass., where the company was accused of contaminating wells which caused children to get leukemia.

No representatives from W.R. Grace were present at last night's meeting and no one spoke in its defense.

"I question where W.R. Grace is, why they aren't here tonight," said North Cambridge resident Robert L. Phillips. "Grace isn't showing any concern whatsoever."

Residents in the neighborhood present at the city council meeting expressed concern that construction would release toxic particles of asbestos into the air, including into nearby playgrounds and Russell athletic field.

"I have received more e-mails about this issue than all of my years on the council," said City Councillor Katherine Triantafillou, who is sponsoring the ordinance.

Current state and federal laws tightly control any action involving asbestos in buildings and enclosed areas, but there are no laws dealing with asbestos in the soil and in open areas.

"If we don't get an ordinance passed we will have no protection from [asbestos particles] since there are no state or federal regulations," said Alewife Study Group member Lisa W. Birk.

Grace had previously offered to wet down the soil during construction in order to prevent excessive dust from entering the air. However, residents felt this promise was not enough.

"The neighbors put forth a lot of effort...we came up with compromise language that appeased both the city and community interests," said Chief Public Health Officer Harold D. Cox.

Discussion on the ordinance ran from 6:30 until 8:30, when it was voted on.

Through an hour and a half of public comment, beginning with State Representative Alice Wolf, many residents came up to the microphone in support of the ordinance, citing their children's safety, personal health issues, and the environmental impact of asbestos particles.

Although a couple of residents expressed minor concerns with specifics of the ordinance, every speaker agreed with the need for strong regulations to prevent asbestos from being released into the air.

After each councillor gave a brief statement, a roll call vote was taken.

All nine members voted for the proposal, and when the mayor pronounced the ordinance approved, the audience exploded in a rousing standing ovation.

"I'm really thrilled, the councillors were the heroes that we thought they could be...it really mattered that all the neighbors showed up," Birk said after the

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meeting.

The concerned citizens filed into the hall, hugging and congratulating each other for a hard fought battle won.

Officials said the ordinance would greatly benefit Cambridge.

"Due to the leadership and diligence of the residents of North Cambridge... [we] enacted a local law which promises to provide adequate protection against asbestos," said Cambridge Mayor Francis H. Duehay '55.

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