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Neighbors worry about future of vacant lot on Van Buren Street

Leaky tar barrels found on site have some concerned about ground, water contamination

By PETER CROWLEY, Enterprise Managing Editor

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SARANAC LAKE - The village uses its land at the end of Van Buren Street for its Public Works and mechanical garages, but it doesn't use the wooded strip of property between the one-block-long road and the train tracks. Village workers didn't even go in there for roughly a decade, according to Department of Public Works Superintendent Robert Martin.

But now that village officials are talking about selling or trading that land to HomEnergy Services for fuel tank storage, this long-neglected public property is starting to get some attention - from someone besides illegal dumpers.

The people who live in and own the houses that line the other side of Van Buren started paying attention after DPW workers hauled four old roofing tar barrels out of those woods a couple of weeks ago. Those residents have written a letter to the village board asking that the property be left alone. They don't want fuel tanks across the street from them, they say, and they argue that disturbing the illegal dump over there will stir up more trouble than it's worth.

A couple of weeks ago, Martin said village officials decided it was time to walk the grounds again, with a HomEnergy deal being discussed and the idea of building a village sand/salt shed on Van Buren reopened. What they saw back there, beyond what can be seen from the road, wasn't pretty. Like some other quieter corners of the village, this grove had been used for decades as an unofficial dumping ground. Leather scraps left over from a former dress/shoe factory at the corner of Van Buren and Broadway, where Kinney Drugs is now, were not seen as an immediate concern, but five rusty old metal barrels were, since the village staff didn't know what was inside them.

The barrels have been there for more than 10 years, according to Linda Tarantelli, who along with her family owns three houses on Van Buren where she once lived and where her mother, daughter and son-in-law still live. It seemed odd to her that the village had done nothing about this dumping ground for so long and was now starting to address it with a possible land deal in the works.

DPW workers hauled four of the 55-gallon drums out of the woods - one still in the woods contains only sand, Martin said - and piled them beside the DPW garage. Each drum had some black roofing tar left in it; they found that out after one of them broke open in the moving process and began leaking tar onto the ground, Martin said - although photos given to the Enterprise seem to show more than one barrel leaking.

"I didn't know what to do with these things," Martin said.

The barrels were placed on wooden pallets with tarps underneath and were then covered with tarps, but tar still leaked onto the ground, as shown in photos taken by Saranac Laker Shawn Boyer, who does not live on Van Buren Street but is actively concerned about the situation there.

The DPW reported the tar leakage to the state Department of Environmental Conservation, and DEC Environmental Engineer Ben Hankins checked it out.

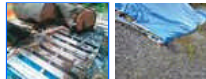
"It doesn't appear to be that big of a problem," Hankins told the Enterprise last week. The tar did not seem to have caused any soil or water contamination "to our knowledge yet," he said.

On Hankins' advice, the DPW hauled the barrels to the Franklin County landfill in Westville on Friday, Martin said.

But for Tarantelli and Boyer, removing the tar barrels from the wooded lot has opened the question of soil contamination there, and they fear it might lead to water contamination.

Boyer said a stream near the railroad tracks, which drains from Kinney Drugs down to the swamp that feeds into Lake Colby, "looks extremely gross. It's red and sludgy looking, and it has an oily sheen on top.

Article Photos



At least one of these rusty old barrels is leaking roofing tar beside the Saranac Lake Department of Public Works garage on Van Buren Street after DPW workers hauled the drums out of a nearby parcel of wooded village land. This picture was provided by Saranac Lake resident Shawn Boyer and taken by a friend of his whom Boyer would not identify.

"I actually feel for the Lake Colby Association (a shoreowner's group) more than I thought," Boyer said. "It really needs attention, and it needs it before any land swap happens. ... If they want to do a land swap, we have plenty more land for it."

"Is it financially worth doing something with that piece of property that appears to be contaminated?" said Tarantelli, whose father, David E. Benham, bought the family's Van Buren Street property in 1979. "It seems like there's got to be another place somewhere where they wouldn't have to go through the testing of the soil."

Another of her main concerns is that she does not want fuel tanks to go in across the street from her property. She considers them a safety hazard and doesn't want the trees to be cleared.

"It's a double-edged sword," she said. "You love to see them go in and clean it up, but you hate to see fuel tanks go in there."

Her recommendation, and that of the eight other Van Buren residents who signed the letter to the village, is for the lot to just be left alone.

Village Mayor Tom Michael told the Enterprise last week that he wasn't aware of the tar barrels but that "until the DEC quantifies what (the contamination) is, we can't take any action on it.

"If the DEC's involved, the appropriate New York state agency is involved; there's no cover-up," Michael said. "They're mandated by law to do something about it."

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