



pollution site? Speak out in Toms River

Four-minute read



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TOMS RIVER - Save Barnegat Bay will host a "Community Speak-Out" Jan. 25 to give residents a chance to voice their opinion on a controversial state settlement that would preserve 1,000 acres of the former Ciba-Geigy Corp. Superfund site.

Township leaders and a growing group of environmental activists have objected to the settlement, which would end a lawsuit filed by the state Department of Environmental Protection in 2007 which accused Ciba of damaging New Jersey's natural resources by polluting parts of its 1,200-acre property.

Britta Forsberg, executive director of Save Barnegat Bay, said the organization decided to host the Jan. 25 meeting, which will be held at Toms River High School North from 6 to 9 p.m., because there were no public meetings on the settlement proposal before DEP announced it last month.

The massive property off Route 37 and Oak Ridge Parkway is now owned by BASF, which acquired Ciba in 2009. Toms River Chemical Co., which became Ciba-Geigy, manufactured industrial dyes and resins at the site for decades; in 1982, the property was designated as a Superfund site by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"I don't think this has been handled at all correctly." Forsberg said of the state settlement, which would allow BASF to develop about 250 acres of land at the Superfund site. "We feel compelled to hold a speak-out."

Forsberg said she first learned of the proposed settlement only about 48 hours before it was announced. She criticized the Murphy Administration for not consulting the communities affected by Ciba's operations before reaching the settlement with BASF.

An initial 30-day comment period for public input on the settlement was in the midst of the holiday season; pushback by the township and environmental advocates led the state to extend the comment period to 60 days.



the DEP."

Ciba settlement: Toms River pans proposed state settlement for Ciba Superfund site

She said Save Barnegat Bay is also "engaging experts" to review the settlement, which does not require BASF to pay any monetary damages for pollution on the property and in the groundwater beneath the site.

The speak-out is one of two Ciba-related events this month sponsored by Save Barnegat Bay. The first, on Jan. 17, is a 4 p.m. free webinar that will feature Diane Salkie, the EPA's remedial project manager for the site.

Salkie is expected to discuss ongoing groundwater cleanup operations on the property, as well as a massive new solar field that has been installed there. For more information on either event, go to www.savebarnegatbay.org, or call 732-830-3600.

Last month, Toms River Mayor Maurice B. "Mo" Hill Jr. spoke out against the DEP settlement proposal shortly after the Township Council adopted a resolution objecting to it. Hill and council members want the entire site preserved, with the 250 acres BASF would be allowed to develop instead turned over to the township to be kept as open space.

Toms River also wants a planned nature center on the property to include the history of Ciba's environmental contamination, and wants BASF to set aside money in a fund to pay for any future health problems that might be attributed to pollution from the property.

In recent years, BASF has been hosting students from local high schools — including Toms River Regional schools — who have assisted with environmental studies and learned about the property's history and remediation efforts.

Once the county's largest employer, Ciba-Geigy, which was eagerly welcomed to Toms River when the plant opened in 1952, would eventually become better known as a notorious polluter.

Waste from the dye production process was tossed into drums in an unlined landfill on the land, and also dumped into pits.

A groundwater pollution plume migrated off the former Ciba site as far back as the 1960s, seeping into public water supplies. Even though it's been greatly reduced in size, part of it



A state and federal study released initially in 2000 determined that some Toms River residents had been exposed to chemical pollutants from the site that had leached into private wells and the public drinking water system decades ago.

The same study determined that the site no longer posed an environmental threat because polluted wells have been sealed and groundwater treatment is in place. About 200 homes are located north of the property, and another 250 to the south. The West Dover Elementary School is adjacent to the site.

The study was completed as part of a massive federal and state investigation into elevated levels of some childhood cancers in Toms River.

That investigation concluded with the release of a report in December 2001 that found exposure to air emissions from the Ciba plant — as well as exposure to water from the Parkway well field — was associated with elevated levels of leukemia in girls.

Groundwater cleanup — paid for by BASF — is still ongoing at the property. Before selling the land, Ciba spent more than \$300 million to treat groundwater and clean up toxic waste on its property, and spent millions more to settle three lawsuits related to toxic waste on its land and the polluted groundwater that it caused.

About half of the underground pollution plume had been cleaned up after 24 years of pumping and treating the water, Stephen K. Havlik, the senior remediation project manager for the company, said in 2020. The groundwater is expected to take about 20 more years to be clean.

The DEP's proposal includes construction of a nature center and a boardwalk area that would allow access to parts of the property for hiking and birding. It would preserve the area of the site located along the Toms River, and would also include conservation of forested area and creation of a pollinator garden.

Comments can be submitted to David Bean, Chief, Office of Natural Resource Restoration, NJDEP, 501 East State Street, Mail Code 501-03, PO Box 420, Trenton, NJ 08625-0420.

Jean Mikle covers Toms River and several other Ocean County towns, and has been writing about local government and politics at the Jersey Shore for nearly 38 years. She's also