

Lawyer for residents suing Inco visits city

Eric Gillespie meets with people concerned about local Soils Study

By Laura Stradiotto

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Local interest and concern about the way the Sudbury Soils Study is proceeding has grown in the last month, said the lawyer representing Port Colborne residents in a lawsuit against Inco Ltd.

Eric Gillespie was in Sudbury this week, meeting and hearing from citizen groups and businesses concerned about how the study is being conducted.

He was also in the city about five weeks ago. "At that point, it wasn't clear what segments of the community would be interested in coming together," he said.

"Based on our recent visit, it's becoming evident (that) there is a broad base of concern, but as well, support for trying to constructively provide input in what's going in the community now."

Gillespie and a group of specialists, including doctors, biologists and geotechnical engineers, have been listening to the concerns of Sudbury residents for some time.

Gillespie and his group hope to arrive at a series of recommendations or suggestions to present to members of the Sudbury Soils Study.

The Sudbury Soils Study, a three-year, \$5-million project, is funded by Falconbridge Ltd. and Inco Ltd.

The study will determine if metals found in Sudbury's soils are a concern, while examining the effect of the metals on the health of the people. Results are expected by the end of 2005.

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Suit: people are concerned about study's credibility

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"People are very concerned that the Soils Study process be something they can accept as being credible," said Gillespie.

"They recognize a lot of time and money is going to be spent on that exercise, but at the end of the day, if people don't have confidence in the results, then obviously the time and money wasn't as well spent as it might have been."

Instead of waiting for results to surface, the group is looking at ways of improving the process along the way.

"It's premature to say what kinds of suggestions are going to come out of those meetings," said Gillespie.

This week, Gillespie met with about 15 local organizations.

"The portions or areas of the communities that have been more directly impacted, there's definitely organization going on right now to ensure those people have a voice in whatever the process is going to turn out to be."

Past studies have shown that areas close to historic smelting sites, such as Copper Cliff, Coniston and Falconbridge, have elevated levels of nickel, copper and arsenic.

Gillespie was unable to meet with Franco Mariotti, the process observer for the Sudbury Soils Study, but hopes to talk with him the next time he's in Sudbury.

Gillespie said he and some members of his team will return in two weeks.

He was retained by Port Colborne residents and representative plaintiff Wilf Pearson to launch a class-action suit on behalf of 10,000 townspeople.

Pearson developed respiratory problems and demanded the results of environmental testing done by Inco near his home be turned over to his doctor.

An independent health risk assessor estimated the cancer risk from nickel in Pearson's home was between 15 and 290 times greater than the Ministry of the Environment has determined is tolerable.

Inco has disputed that expert's findings.

The courts are still deciding if the class-action suit against Inco can proceed.

In the meantime, about 1,500 residents of the small town, where an Inco refinery processed more than 2.5 million tonnes of nickel oxide from 1918-1984, have filed individual lawsuits against the nickel giant.