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# Monument in the making City crisis began after fire ended

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Saturday marks the second anniversary of the fire in the Binghamton State Office Building that spread chemicals through the 18-story structure. The how, why and if of the event remains elusive. For the next seven days, The Evening Press will examine this story, with new information about the accident and government's response to the serious health and environmental questions.

By STEVE GEIMANN

At 5 a.m. on Thursday, February 6, 1981, the temperature in downtown Binghamton was 5 degrees below zero. A frigid west wind made a cruel knife of the cold.

Smoke from chimneys hung in the sky as if immobilized by the freezing night. Except for an occa-



KEITH HITCHENS

## Binghamton State Office Building

sional car, the city streets and sidewalks were deserted.

Inside the city's tallest building — the 18-story Binghamton State Office Building — security guard

See FIRE, 4A

# Fire

Continued from 1A

Lois Whittemore made her last rounds before calling it a night. One of her jobs was to monitor the heating system and she had recorded that it was working normally. Stationary engineer Michael Decker worked near the control board in the basement.

The night had been routine. Decker and Whittemore had had the building to themselves since 1 a.m., when the night cleaning crew went home.

At about 5:15 a.m., two hours before sunrise, Whittemore wrote her final entry of the night in the building log: "Everything OK."

But she didn't know what was happening in the basement.

There, one floor below where Whittemore stood, electrical circuits that supplied energy for the building's lights, electrical outlets, air conditioning and heating were going haywire.

An electrical accident of some kind — to this day, no one is sure what kind — was beginning.

The room filled with the popping and cracking sounds of electricity arcing across burned-out circuits. Bright flashes of blue light created a strobe effect on everything in the room.

Whittemore remembers the moment.

"I was walking to the elevator," Whittemore said. "I had just pushed the button. That's when all the noise started. I looked directly at the clock, it said 5:32."

Whittemore heard a thud like the sound of thunder off in the distance, but magnified several hundred times. Smoke alarms began buzzing 30 seconds after the thuds, and two hatches above each stairwell opened, as planned, to expell smoke from the fire below.

What had been a quiet night was quickly turning into a nightmare — not just for Whittemore but for two dozen Binghamton city firefighters, the State of New York and residents of the city.

Whittemore knows that in those few seconds, the quiet of the night turned into chaos: elevators on the main floor refused to move. Cars on upper floors moved with hesitation, then stopped. Lights on the main floor began to dim.

"All the electricity was going spazzo," Whittemore said.

Decker ran up from the basement as Whittemore ran for an office to check out the alarms. Decker told her: "The machine room is on fire."

Decker's face reflected horror, Whittemore recalls. His eyes were bulging; his face was white.

Next door to the State Office Building, a warning light blinked on the alarm panel of the Binghamton Fire Bureau. At first, officials thought little of the alarm; the 10-year-old building occasionally had a malfunctioning alarm system.

A few seconds later, though, Whittemore called the city and told them there was a fire in the building.

Deputy Fire Chief Donald E. Faughnan heard the thuds Whittemore heard as he walked down a ramp at the rear of the building to answer the alarm. But to him they were explosions the likes of which he had never heard before, nor since.

At least three explosions made the building quiver. After a few minutes, the explosions ended. One blast ripped a large hole in the circuit board. To Faughnan, it looked like an artillery shell had been fired through the panel.

The pungent odor of vinyl chloride filled the basement where the firefighters waited. Faughnan knew the smell came from burning electrical insulation. He ordered his men to suit up with special breathing equipment.

New York State Electric & Gas Corp., the power company, was called by the fire bureau at 5:49, about 13 minutes after the alarms. Power was shut off at 6:20.

So, for almost 50 minutes, the electrical arcing continued in the mechanical room as two dozen Binghamton firefighters stood outside, waiting for the power to be turned off.

Temperatures began rising as the fire burned. In the middle of the switch gear, temperatures probably reached 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit, Faughnan said. In other parts of the room, it was well over 200 degrees, he said.

The fire didn't amount to much, Faughnan said later. But the heat caused by the electrical malfunction continued to build as the firefighters waited for the power to be shut off.

The heat was so intense a porcelain insulator cracked a few inches from the top of a General Electric Co. transformer at one side of the electrical

panel. The transformer was not in use at the time.

The crack allowed about 180 gallons of 1,100 gallons of Askarel cooling fluid in the transformer to leak onto the floor and over the super-hot electrical circuits.

The oil contained polychlorinated biphenyls, a chemical compound used for 40 years to keep transformers cool. PCBs, as they are called, don't burn, and were used in large quantities for electrical equipment. In 1979, the use of PCB oil as transformer coolant was banned by the federal government but the ban did not apply to transformers already in use, such as the one in the State Office Building.

The Askarel oil did its job Feb. 5, 1981: it didn't burn. It did something far worse; it vaporized, or pyrolyzied.

Pyrolysis is a chemical process that takes place in the presence of extreme heat or electricity, converting one chemical into another substance.

In this case, the new substance was an amalgam of chemicals which included several varieties of dioxin and furan compounds, including the version considered the most toxic substance made by man — tetrachlorodibenzodioxin or, in the chemist's lingo, TCDD.

Officials didn't know until a week later that the chemicals were formed in the fire. They didn't reveal the fact until three weeks after the fire.

The fire also turned the plastic insulation around the cables and wires on the switching gear into a black soot which mixed with the vaporizing oil. The result was a greasy, black film of soot that turned into a black cloud in the mechanical room.

Tucked in a corner of the room was a small ventilation shaft with an opening 2 feet by 5 feet wide. It stretched from the basement to the roof, passing through the men's restroom on each floor.

The cloud of toxic chemicals was sucked into this shaft by air currents as the hot air in the room tried to rise.

The soot cloud entered the shaft and rose through the building, passing through the open ducts in the restrooms and ceiling cracks. A fine mist of soot slipped through the bathroom doors into the hallways and offices.

Faughnan said he found something unusual when the doors were first opened. Instead of smoke pouring out through the opening, it appeared to be pulled back into the building.

"This is contrary to the way smoke usually behaves," Faughnan said.

The ventilation shaft working in concert with the two rooftop smoke hatches on top of stairwells created a draft in the building, like a chimney. The open hatches, leading to the cold night air, sucked the warmer air upwards.

Once outside, the escaping toxic cloud was caught in a low-level temperature inversion, a weather phenomenon that traps air close to the ground. That meant that the cloud hung relatively close to the building and when it did disperse later in the morning, it probably stayed in the lower atmosphere and fell closer to the building, in the downtown area.

Crews wearing protective garb entered the room and quickly put out the lingering fires, then waited for the molten metal to cool down.

Within an hour, the electrical chaos and the chemical production process was over. By sunrise, a new crisis was just beginning.

The Sunday Press  
Jan. 30, 1983 • Binghamton, N.Y.



Lois Whittemore  
... security guard

# Questions on open shaft linger along with toxins

Questions about the construction of the 18-story State Office Building persist two years after the fire.

Most questions center on the ventilation shaft near the men's restrooms, which served as the main escape route for the soot contaminated with dioxins, furans and PCBs.

Was that shaft supposed to be open?

Fire investigators and a building construction expert said it was unusual for such an opening to provide access from the machine room directly to every floor in the building.

"I've never seen a shaft that hasn't been blocked near a mechanical room," said Steven L. Biegel, director of program planning, National Institute of Building Sciences, based in Washington.

Biegel said construction practices require mechanical rooms to be sealed off with cinder block walls that can withstand two hours of fire.

Donald E. Faughnan, deputy chief of the Binghamton Fire Bureau, and Philip Lomax, a fire investigator for the state Department of State, said such a shaft should be sealed near a mechanical room.

"If that shaft had been closed, we would only have had a basement fire," Faughnan said.

New York's current building code requires such protection, although the code does not apply to public buildings. However, most state buildings con-

form to the code where possible, said Francis A. McGarry, state fire administrator.

Officials of the agency in charge of state buildings have not provided evidence on exact plans for the Binghamton building.

"We don't believe there was any code requirement to have the (shaft) closed at the bottom," said Harry S. Stevens Jr., director of design and construction for the Office of General Services.

Stevens said he has not seen the plans or checked the codes in effect when the tower was constructed.

Other officials demur when asked for details on the accident, which occurred two years ago this Saturday.

"It was just a series of circumstances," said David K. Seiffert, principal mechanical construction engineer, Office of General Services. Seiffert said the original plans are not detailed enough to show whether that vent should have been blocked.

Seiffert and Stevens said the equipment was inspected at least once a year. The previous examination was in Sept. 1980. However, neither man has checked the report since the fire.

To make any determination more complicated, the electrical panels were ripped from the building a few days after the fire and discarded in a secure landfill near Niagara Falls.

—STEVE GEIMANN

# Dioxin is major hazard

*Editor's note: Saturday is the second anniversary of the fire in the Binghamton State Office Building that spread toxic chemicals throughout the building's 18 floors. It was an unprecedented accident. The hows, whys and ifs of the event remain elusive. This week, The Evening Press will examine this story, not merely recollecting but also revealing new information about the accident and government's response to the serious health and environmental questions that remain. Today's story, the second in a series, reviews the scientific literature on dioxin, the most deadly chemical known to man.*

By STEVE GEIMANN

A chemical called dioxin has become America's environmental evil of the '80s, eclipsing harmful pesticides such as DDT or deadly poisons such as arsenic as a danger to human health.

Scientists now think dioxin is a far greater villain than polychlorinated biphenyls, which acted as the catalyst in the two-year-old Binghamton State Office

## Monument in the making

Building chemical crisis.

First, dioxins are deadly. A little bit can kill an animal and cause an array of biological problems, from abortions to crippling the immunity system.

The effects in humans are less documented. Researchers recently claimed three workers at a chemical factory exposed to dioxin died of a rare, soft-tissue sarcoma, or cancer of the tissues holding organs together.

See DIOXIN, Back Page

The Evening Press  
Jan. 31, 1983 • Binghamton, N.Y.

## Dioxin

Continued from 1A

Second, dioxins have no use. The chemical is an unwanted ingredient in the manufacture of pesticides and is also formed when other chemicals are exposed to extremely high temperatures or electricity.

Although unwanted and unused, the chemical exists in the nooks and crannies of the 18-story state office building, creating anxiety for workers, uncertainty for the community and a monument to technology gone awry.

In his budget to be presented to the state legislature today Gov. Mario M. Cuomo is expected to ask for the re-appropriation of \$5.8 million for the decontamination and reconstruction of the Binghamton State Office Building. No new money is expected to be sought for the clean-up in Cuomo's budget.

The fears in Binghamton are not unique. Homeowners in Times Beach, Mo., at Love Canal in Niagara Falls in Seveso, Italy, have first-hand experience with dioxins. The presence of dioxin in the soil forced many residents from their homes.

Vietnam veterans were exposed to the defoliant, Agent Orange, which contained traces of dioxin as a contaminating ingredient. A recent film on Agent Orange underscored the uncertainty about dioxin: "Doubts are more cruel than the worst truth."

In Binghamton, officials believe only trace amounts of dioxin escaped from the state office tower after an early morning fire and explosion almost two years ago. The bulk of the deadly chemical is inside the building at about 2 to 3 parts per million.

Despite several industrial accidents with extensive biological testing and frequent scientific papers in journals, the exact dangers of dioxin remain unclear.

Certainly, more is known about dioxin today than two years ago, when the combination of 3,000-degree heat and transformer oil cooled with PCBs formed significant amounts of dioxin in the soot that has fouled the 18-story tower.

For example, scientists know a 25 microgram dose can kill a two-pound chicken. A microgram is one-millionth of a gram.

Less is understood about the other chemical found in the state office building, dibenzofuran. Most available scientific evidence shows the furan compounds just slightly less toxic than dioxin and the principal contaminant in the type of oil used in transformers.

Experiments on animals using dioxin in its pure form have failed to produce conclusions accepted by other scientists.

Mice show signs of skin cancer, abortions are common in rhesus monkeys and rats show signs of nutritional loss when fed dioxin.

Humans exposed to the chemicals in the workplace or after accidents in Missouri and Italy exhibit less severe results.

"Man may be fairly resistant to the chemicals in terms of the amount it takes to make a guinea pig sick," said Dr. Ernest E. McConnell, chief, chemical pathology branch, National Institutes of Health in North Carolina.

His view is disputed by Dr. Bertram Carnow, occupational health consultant and adviser to Illinois railroad workers who recently won a large settlement after being exposed to dioxin.

Carnow examined 77 men exposed to dioxin in soil at 30 parts per million and found five, or 11 percent, developed skin cancer where only 0.17 percent of the residents are likely to develop cancer a year.

"The only safe level of dioxin is non-detectable," he said.

Individuals exposed to the soot in Binghamton have reported some adverse health effects, none confirmed by officials monitoring their health.

Members of the citizen's committee formed 14 months ago claim they've heard from people suffering psychological problems, with a corresponding increase in alcohol and drug use.

New York state denies those claims and has been rebuffed in seeking more information from the citizens.

McConnell said the best evidence of effect in humans is likely to come from the industrial accident in Seveso, Italy, a small industrial community north of Milan.

On a sunny Saturday in July 1976, an accident at a chemical factory released large amounts of dioxin into the air. Thousands were contaminated.

Cows and horses died quickly. Birds fell from the sky.

School-age children playing outdoors developed rashes and in some cases, chloracne, a severe case of the teenager's curse, accompanied by sores and lesions on the skin.

"That was all they saw," McConnell said. "After a while, it subsided."

Chemicals workers exposed after an accident in Nitro, W. Va., more than 30 years ago showed no increased abnormalities, McConnell said.

The most recent "breakthrough" test on animals was reported last November by a Wisconsin researcher.

Dr. Alan Poland of the University of Wisconsin's McArdle Laboratory for Cancer Research, reported the most poisonous dioxin, 2,3,7,8 tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin, or TCDD, promotes cancer tumors in mice.

Poland applied TCDD to the skin of mice treated with a non-lethal amount of a known carcinogen. In most cases, the mice develop cancer.

"Hairless mice repeatedly administered high doses of (dioxin) have skin which is easily damaged and may develop abscesses about the face," Poland wrote in the Nov. 18, 1982, issue of *Nature*, a British scientific journal.

"The animals assume a humped stature, with the back arched above the shoulders, and they move about poorly," Poland added.

Poland said his tests may apply to humans because the effects seen on the skin of mice is similar to the effects on human skin during one-time exposure.

A U.S. scientist at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found TCDD fed to rats caused a decrease in the absorption of nutrients from food, but no cancer or death.

Dr. Louise M. Ball working with four others reported the rat's intestines were unable to absorb simple sugar amino acids, a basic nutrient, and glucose.

A Dow Chemical Co. scientist reported in the *Journal of Toxic Environmental Health* in June 1981, a majority of the laboratory animals died 26 days to 46 days after a massive dose of TCDD was applied.

As for PCBs, information on its lack of toxicity is becoming clear. A major poisoning in Yusho, Japan, in 1968, and a similar incident in Taiwan, in 1979, involved more than 1,000 people who cooked with rice oil containing high levels of PCBs. Most suffered chloracne.

At first, PCBs were thought to be the principal poison. Tests reported in Dec. 1981 and Feb. 1982 found that polychlorinated dibenzofurans, similar to the compounds found in the Binghamton soot, were responsible for the problems.

General Electric Co., which made the state office building transformer, questions the role of PCBs in causing illness.

Robert S. Friedman, manager, environmental issues affairs, said tests on GE workers exposed to PCBs in transformer factories show no "life-threatening or irreversible effects."

Tomorrow: State bungles health monitoring program for workers exposed to the office building chemicals.

# The Evening Press

2/1/83  
 Sections  
**FINAL EDITION**

**TUESDAY**

## Monument in the making Bungled tests added to toxic tower delays

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the third in a series of stories re-examining the 1981 fire in the Binghamton State Office Building. Today, Reporter Steve Geimann looks at what steps the state took to monitor workers exposed to chemicals after the blaze broke out.

By STEVE GEIMANN

It's like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle without knowing the shape of the pieces or the design of the picture.

In scientific terms, toxic chemicals are a vast unknown. Each new medical or laboratory discovery adds a little more to the portrait scientists are trying to make of the biological effects of such chemicals as dioxin and polychlorinated biphenyls.

Especially important, scientists agree, are tests from humans exposed to the chemicals. Those studies are the only way to make conclusions about a chemical's health and environmental effects.

Future scientists may have problems, however, in determining the effects of dioxin contamination in the Binghamton State Office Building. Private health experts said the state's health monitoring program for state workers exposed to toxic chemicals has been bungled several times.

For example, blood taken from exposed workers after the Feb. 5, 1981, fire was lost or broken and stored alongside lunches and soft drinks in a community refrigerator in the state Health Department.

Some blood samples collected by Broome County in the first week after the fire were sent to a New Jersey laboratory that was not certified to analyze PCBs, state officials said.

People who may have been exposed were not, in every instance, tested and irregularities were detected in the first samples from a Wisconsin laboratory, further delaying final analysis.

Several months after the fire, a state Health Department physician assigned to work on the chemical crisis quit to protest the state's handling of the health monitoring program.

"It's a lousy deal," says Lois Whittemore, a state security guard who was on duty when the fire and explosions occurred.

Whittemore and 480 persons who went into the 18-story building after the fire or thought they were exposed became part of the surveillance program in late 1981. A single blood sample from each was taken.

One year later, on Dec. 9, the state reported the results, concluding the tests showed "no evidence of any PCB-related health effects."

Challenged by a citizens' group, the state was

See TESTS, 6A

need quickly to admit the analysis was faulty and needed more research and study before a conclusion can be drawn.

Officials now concede the swift analysis was designed to allay public concern. Instead, it fueled public distrust.

"We were under pressure to get some information out," said Dr. Susan J. Standfast, a state epidemiologist assigned to the health surveillance program.

Each person now will be studied in light of the time they spent in the building. The first analysis compared people exposed for a few minutes with people who spent more than 25 hours inside the tower. That mixture, the state admits, threw off the final results.

The new analysis will not begin until late February, however.

At least one expert claims everything the state is doing is insufficient to tell what's happening to people exposed to the chemicals.

"No one seems to know what constitutes medical surveillance," said Dr. Ellen K. Silbergeld, chief toxicologist for the Environmental Defense Fund and chief spokesman for the citizens committee on the state building. "It's very vague."

Silbergeld fears time has run out for the state. Chemical levels in those exposed have probably decayed dramatically from the days after the fire, she said.

"There is some urgency for the state to make up its mind," she said.

In October 1981, Dr. Richard Ilka, former deputy director of the state Division of Laboratories and Research, quit his job to protest the way the state is handling the testing.

Medical surveillance is the only way epidemiologists can judge the toxic effects of unknown chemicals like dioxins, dibenzofurans and PCBs. Those state results are the same as laboratory experiments on animals.

Individuals exposed to dioxin and its related toxic chemicals often survive the initial exposure without incident, but develop serious health problems decades later.

Those tests often begin within a few months of exposure and can continue for months or, in some cases, years. Chemical workers exposed to high levels of dioxin at a Monsanto Co. chemical plant in West Virginia 30 years ago are still being studied.

Several Binghamton residents, notably former deputy Health Commissioner Dr. Arnold J. Nectter, have insisted on lifetime tests for those most seriously exposed in the building, citing the long waiting time to see signs of contamination.

The medical surveillance program, a key element in any effort to reopen the state office building, initially involved only those people who volunteered to be tested. Later, the state actively sought individuals it knew were exposed.

Silbergeld, who is also involved in the dioxin contamination incident in Times Beach, Mo., said the unitary approach was wrong.

"The state had a responsibility," she said, "to track anyone who was exposed and to take a blood sample."

The state collected blood from 318 persons who worked inside the state building and 203 persons who worked in the county and city buildings. A portion, about 185 persons, spent more than 25 hours inside the tower.

(NEXT: The state's handling of the cleanup)



# Local

Feb. 1, 1983

The Evening Press • Binghamton, N. Y.

## Tower money is same

By STEVE GEIMANN

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo will not seek an increase in money to clean the chemically contaminated Binghamton State Office Building this year.

Cuomo asked the legislature today for \$3 million in 1983-84 for the cleaning, a reallocation of money appropriated last year and the year before, but not spent.

"I'm told we need \$3 million," Cuomo said at a briefing in Albany yesterday. "That is all we need for the moment."

"It's not a cutback, we're going forward," Cuomo stressed. "We'll spend whatever it takes."

The state has appropriated \$11.1 million since the Feb. 5, 1981, fire and explosion which closed the office tower. All but \$3 million has been spent or is under contract.

Officials working on the cleaning predicted last week the office building will remain closed for two years while contractors rebuild substantial portions of the inside.

Cuomo said the cleaning and decontamination

remains a top priority of his administration and he said he wanted positive proof the building is safe before workers return to their jobs.

"We'll do what we have to do," Cuomo said. "We're talking here about life and health."

Cuomo said he will be "assiduous" in asking Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod to assess health risks before deciding whether the building will be reopened and reoccupied by the state workers.

Cuomo said based on information from the 12-person expert panel and the health department, the cleaning "is going well."

Cuomo told *The Evening Press* the health of the workers will be his primary concern: "I have to be sure no one is going to get hurt. I have to be sure no one is going to get sick."

Cuomo aides said the state will have spent or contracted to spend \$8.6 million by April 1, the start of the fiscal year.

Former Gov. Hugh L. Carey asked for \$7 million last year and \$4.1 million in 1981-82. Cuomo needs Legislature approval to spend the remainder in the next fiscal year.

Four Sections

FINAL EDITION

**WEDNESDAY**

Feb. 2, 1983

Binghamton, N.Y.

**THE EVENING PRESS**

# Cleanup leaves tower shell of its former self

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fourth in a series of stories re-examining the 1981 fire in the Binghamton State Office Building. Today Reporter Steve Geimann looks at the state's handling of the cleanup.

By STEVE GEIMANN

What was once a typical office building of offices, desks, potted plants and water coolers now resembles a stage set from a Samuel Beckett play.

Since the disastrous fire at the Binghamton State Office Building two years ago, every piece of furniture, every decorative feature has been removed. Huge holes have been made in the walls to facilitate cleaning. The floor tiles have been ripped up. The only workers who come out of the elevators each morning wear white body suits and air masks. The sound of typewriters and office chatter has been replaced by the whirr of vacuums.

The workers are in the demolition business, but without the dust and noise normally associated with tearing down a building.

They're slowly demolishing the inside of the state office building to remove soot with toxic chemicals, including deadly dioxins, which has kept the building closed for two years.

The job has kept 60 men busy for a year and cost New York taxpayers \$8.6 million, with another \$3 million to be spent this year and untold millions more in the future.

"We'll spend whatever it takes," Gov. Mario M. Cuomo said this week as he unveiled his 1983-84 state budget.

Since the fire on Feb. 5, 1981, the state agency in charge of the building — the Office of General Services — has had one aim: to clean an unprecedentedly dirty building.

That aim has at times brought OGS into

## Monument in the making

conflict with the state Health Department, whose charge is to protect the public health.

The cleanup, though controversial, has given scientists a rare chance to experiment with techniques to clean up wastes and check for deadly chemicals like dioxins and dibenzofurans.

For example, a new method to collect air was developed to measure for dioxins and dibenzofurans, the two most poisonous chemicals found in the building.

A revolutionary new test to duplicate the oil of human skin is being devised to see how much soot is absorbed by the skin from desk tops and floors. Conventional measures either fail to collect enough soot, or too much material.

Each day, the cleanup crews use paper towels and push special vacuum cleaners to trap particles of contaminated soot from the floor, wall and exposed ceilings on every floor.

Workers also use paper swabs dipped in an industrial detergent known as Triton X-100, a cleaner resembling a super-strong Fantastic, to wash down every exposed surface, from the non-asbestos insulation above the ripped-out ceilings to the floor and walls.

The paper "cloth" is discarded at the first sign of soot and is not dipped back into the solution.

Robert A. Westin, senior chemical engineer of Versar New York Inc., a private firm hired to oversee the cleanup, said the work has been successful, except on the floors.

See CLEANUP, Back Page

# Cleanup

Continued from 1A

Tests last year showed up to 396 micrograms of polychlorinated biphenyls per square meter on wax-covered vinyl tiles. The wax apparently absorbs the PCBs and makes it impossible to wash, Westin said.

Vinyl-covered walls are 10 times less contaminated with up to 36.8 micrograms per square meter while desk tops showed 46 micrograms per square meter, Westin said. A test in January showed measurable levels of PCBs in the insulation.

"We're getting loose soot," Westin said in an interview. A report submitted by Versar last year concluded: "Repeated efforts to clean the ceramic and vinyl floor tile with detergent solution have not been successful."

Other chemicals are not being measured. Officials have devised a ratio to keep track of the dioxins as the PCBs are measured.

High PCB levels on the floors recently prompted the state to abandon the tiles on all 18 floors. It's less expensive to replace the tile now than spend more money to clean it, especially since the worn-out tile would have to be replaced in several years anyway.

The tedious cleaning, which began in February 1982, has cost about \$1.5 million, with each floor taking about 10 days to two weeks to vacuum and clean. Allwash Inc. of Syracuse has been hired to provide the crews, the equipment and materials for the cleaning.

As of yesterday, the firm had vacuumed and washed from the 18th or top floor down to the 9th floor and vacuumed between the 9th floor and 3rd floor. The cleaning is slated to end April 1.

Versar received \$2.1 million for developing cleaning plans, monitoring the cleaners and providing a dozen security guards, and for air tests in the basement parking garage.

During the cleaning, workers moved 930 desks, 1,950 chairs, 850 file cabinets, 522 tables, 200 typewriters, 325 bookcases, 50 couches, 40 adding machines, 20 postage scales, 15 copier machines, 15 computer terminals and 100 lockers to the underground garage.

Hundreds of thousands of records and files with even minuscule amounts of black soot were discarded in a special landfill. The state is reconstructing those records.

"It's just like a warehouse," said David L. Mummert, Versar health and safety officer.

The 60 workmen (for health reasons, women of child-bearing age are not allowed) spend a normal day inside the building, although their job is anything but normal. Drinking, eating and smoking must be done outside the building.

Each worker must strip and shower after removing his white spacesuit and then pass through a special trailer in the basement before returning to the normal world.

Four Sections

FINAL EDITION

# WEDNESDAY

Feb. 2, 1983

The state's biggest expense was right after the fire when it employed emergency methods to do an immediate cleanup.

A temporary power system was installed, a toxic clean-up crew from Connecticut mopped up spilled PCB oil and maintenance workers more accustomed to dirty floors and overflowing waste baskets swept up the soot.

Those emergency contracts cost just over \$1 million.

The state also spent \$113,000 to renovate the former Columbus School on Hawley Street, which was turned into the new home for the displaced workers. The state pays \$5,000 a month in rent.

In the first, frantic days after the fire, the state's rush to clean and reopen the building resulted in mistakes, some of which may have allowed contamination from the tower to be tracked into downtown Binghamton.

After the fire, state officials ordered workers into the building to begin vacuuming to reopen the tower "within a few days."

State crews from Watertown, Buffalo and Albany went into the building wearing only thin protective suits while some local officials began worrying about the toxicity of the chemicals.

The state admitted only that PCBs were in the soot, while local health officials like Dr. Arnold J. Schechter, then county health commissioner, privately warned more dangerous dioxins and dibenzofurans might be found.

State documents reveal the state, too, knew highly toxic chemicals might be in the soot, but did not say so publicly or stop the cleaning. "There was no reason to stop as long as the safety plan was being followed," Dr. David Axelrod, state health commissioner, said a month after the fire.

Admitting other chemicals were present might have caused unnecessary alarm, officials said.

Before the dioxin was found, state officials said, the cleanup workers walked through Binghamton City Hall in their work suits and toilets containing toxic soot were flushed.

There were also subsequent admissions that the health and safety plan developed for cleaning PCBs was violated as cleanup workers walked around downtown still suited up.

John F. Hudacs, executive deputy commissioner of OGS, concedes the cleanup got out of hand; but he insists the response was appropriate given the information in hand.

*Tomorrow: The state tries to rebuild its image and the building.*

## State still ducks issue of building chemicals

Editor, *The Press*

I have read with interest the articles related to the contamination of the State Office Building at Binghamton with dioxins and PCBs, and the reaction of the state to the CBS report concerning this issue. I read a lot about "doom and gloom" for Binghamton, but nothing about the real issue: current and long-term health hazard for at least 500 persons exposed to the chemicals.

The state accusations of nonprofessional journalism seem dim in light of the apathy exhibited by officials of New York state concerning certain questions that remain unanswered for at least one taxpayer — me.

New York, here's your chance to clear up rumors circulating in my neighborhood. Perhaps you haven't had

the opportunity to voice your opinion, as was suggested after the CBS report. Now you have no excuse; we're all listening.

The facts speak for themselves. These chemicals are silent killers, known to harm exposed persons and their offspring 20 and 30 years down the road. How many people have to develop cancer, skin disease, neurological problems, leukemia, etc., before anyone listens?

When a similar incident occurred in The Netherlands, officials encased the building in concrete and dropped it into the North Sea. The State of New York appears to have encased the dirty SOB in a shroud of political propaganda, and dropped it into the lap of John Q. Taxpayer.

LYNN R. TERRELL  
Harpursville

## Monument in the making Tough state task: Restoring faith

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fifth part in a series marking the second anniversary of the 1981 fire that contaminated the Binghamton State Office Building. Today's story examines how information about the potential dangers was handled by the state.

By STEVE GEIMANN

New York has two jobs to do before it reopens the contaminated Binghamton State Office Building: rebuild the structure from basement to roof and rebuild its own tainted image.

Both tasks can be expected to take months, even years. State officials predict that reconstructing the building, piece by piece, will take another 1 to 2½ years.

Regaining credibility, which will play an even bigger role in determining whether the building ever reopens, may take longer.

"It will be the people (of the community) who will make the decision on whether it's acceptable (to return to the building)," said John L. Buckley, Broome County's consultant on the cleanup.

Dr. Robert H. Huffaker, director of the state Office of Public Health, has acknowledged a credibility gap and recent statements indicate he is taking steps to build bridges with the community.

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, who assumed responsibility from a somewhat flippant predecessor, Gov. Hugh L. Carey, said the decision to reopen will be his and his alone.

"I have to be sure no one is going to be hurt," Cuomo said in Albany this week. "I have to be sure no one is going to get sick."

The decision to reopen, he said, will not be made until he has "solid

proof" the chemicals are at levels deemed safe by the expert panel.

However, there are still some public-relations rough spots.

The state has, in recent weeks, appeared to time release of new information to blunt criticism from citizens.

For example, the first blood test results were distributed on the same day last December that a Broome County ad hoc citizens committee met to discuss the crisis with outside experts. The group had criticized the state for delaying the release of information.

Several weeks later, officials issued a press release on a new air test in which they were optimistic the building could be cleaned and reopened. The release came several hours after a CBS News report cast the cleanup in an unfavorable light.

State officials describe the two incidents as coincidental.

Huffaker tried to treat the wounds last month by arranging an informal meeting with representatives of the citizens group and appearing before a joint meeting of the editorial boards of *The Evening Press* and *The Sun-Bulletin*.

However, such wounds take time to heal. The state's credibility suffered initial damage in July 1981 when the state withheld information on tests showing chicken embryos died or were deformed when injected with soot from the building.

Though it was apparently known soon after the fire that the soot contained highly toxic chemicals, the state did not release the information until three weeks after the fire. Broome County officials, who suspected the soot was contaminated

See IMAGE, Back Page

Four Sections

FINAL EDITION

**THURSDAY**

Feb. 3, 1983

# Image

Continued from 1A

with more than polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, urged the state to discontinue the cleaning until tests were done. The state kept the cleaning crews working.

Problems with the medical surveillance program, which has taken more than a year to set up, further weakened the state's position. The potential dangers, at first understated if not minimized by the state, have now been recognized to the extent that a psychological program is being considered to ease the fears of workers.

Then there was Carey's famous offer, when asked about the dangers posed by the building, to "swallow an entire glass of PCBs." That, to the state image-builders, was like a wrecker's ball turning a ramshackle house into a jumble of splinters. It instantly undid what little good work had been done.

In addition, leaders of a citizens committee formed six months after the fire charged the state had a conflict of interest because the agency running the cleanup was in charge of the building.

The state is both regulator and regulated, they claimed. The state, while not acknowledging any conflict, formed an advisory panel composed of scientists not employed by the state.

Part of the state's reaction appears linked to the past, when a public relations debacle at the dioxin contamination crisis at Love Canal in summer 1978 stirred national attention.

Some of the same health department officials reacted skittishly in Binghamton, trying to avoid public appearances and statements which might arouse a worried populace.

One problem frustrates both the citizens and the state workers, and the officials involved in the cleaning: the lack of clear understanding about the chemicals in the tower.

"This is one of the most difficult things to overcome," admitted John F. Hudacs, executive deputy director, Office of General Services.

"I never get any real answers that I wanted," said Patricia A. Zemanek, a local union official. "I didn't get any answers I understood."

To win back public confidence, the state is planning a series of informal meetings with small groups of employees to answer individual concerns. Those meetings have begun and their frequency will increase, Hudacs said.

As the state tries to win the minds of workers, the 18-story building will be rebuilt as slowly as it was dismantled.

"Rehabilitation of the building is in the discussion stage as to what kind of repairs will be needed," said David K. Seiffert, principal building engineer, Office of General Services.

The state may use the opportunity to give the building a new look inside, using modular office furniture, for instance, if the original furniture cannot be cleaned. Also under consideration is a complete overhaul of the ventilation system to cut energy costs.

However, the state cannot do anything inside the tower yet. The 1983-84 state budget has only enough money to complete the cleaning, not the rebuilding.

Semantics also plays a part when the state's informational role is discussed.

For example, Hudacs and David R. Rings, executive coordinator of Office of General Services, stress the building will be "refurbished". The dictionary defines refurbish as "brighten or freshen."

State officials now estimate the rebuilding will take 18 months to two years beginning in the late spring. Such a timetable would push the reopening into early 1985

*Tomorrow: The citizens got angry*

# Editorials

## Fat biopsy pros and cons

The state would be doing itself and the people who were exposed to polychlorinated biphenyls at the State Office Building in Binghamton a favor if it gave them more information about fat biopsies.

The tests have been a topic of debate ever since a citizens' committee, made up in part of people who worked in and around the building following the fire there two years ago, began seeking information on the effects of exposure to PCBs and other chemicals in the building. The committee says the blood tests the state did last year are invalid because PCBs would, by now, have passed from the blood into the fatty tissue of the body. The state says the blood tests are valid.

We have urged the state to pay for fat biopsies for a sample group of those exposed to PCBs at the office building and, once the results are known, for any of the 479 people believed to have been exposed who want one.

We still think the state should pick up the tab for the fat biopsies, but we're disturbed by some information about the test that was made available by state officials during a recent meeting with the editorial board of *The Sun-Bulletin*. We were left wondering why

the state hasn't given that information to those 479 people.

The test is, as has been reported, a surgical procedure done under anesthesia. What is perhaps less well known is that it can involve the removal of as much as 100 grams — roughly a third of a cup — of fat.

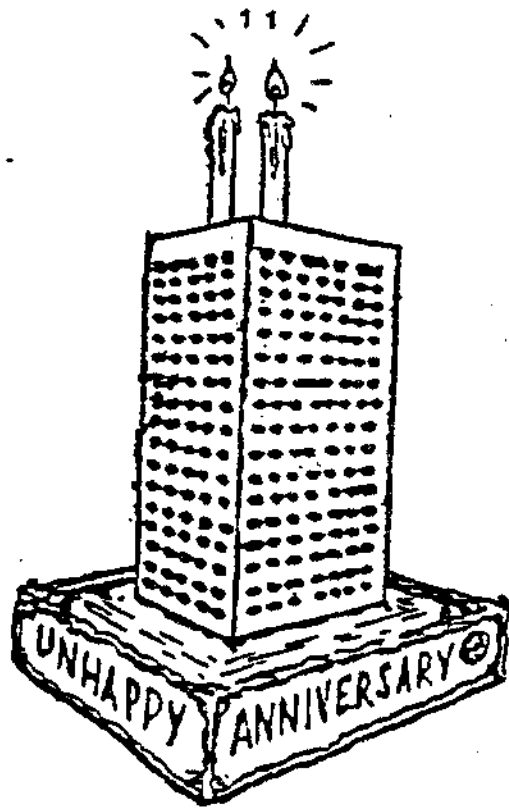
Aside from the risks inherent in the use of anesthesia there is also a risk of infection after the surgery. One state official said the surgery often is followed by considerable discomfort.

Most troubling, though, is the fact that no matter what level of PCBs is found in the fat, there is no treatment for it. The state can do no more than recommend that those with high levels of the chemical in their fat avoid further exposure to PCBs. As if they needed to be told.

The officials said they will try to accommodate any of those 479 people who want to have the test done. That's not enough. The state should make available to them information about the pros and cons of the test. And the state's information should be accompanied by a statement on the subject from an expert selected by the citizens' committee.

STATE OFFICE BUILDING  
2<sup>nd</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
LET'S GET TOGETHER

MARKERT  
PLACE  
STEPHEN'S  
SQUARE



FRI. FEB. 4<sup>th</sup>  
5:00 P.M.  
(after work)

- LEST THEY FORGET -  
ALL INVITED

HORS D'OEUVRES - S.O.B. CAKE



# Editorials

## Keep information on tower flowing

Tomorrow is an anniversary, but don't bother to break out the party hats and noisemakers.

It's the second anniversary of the fire that contaminated the State Office Building in Binghamton, a fire that prompted one of the first state officials to arrive on the scene to say that it might be several days before the building could reopen.

"Several days" has turned into two years. Now we are told it will be two more years before the building can reopen. Even then, there's no guarantee that people will want to go back into it.

In a recent meeting with the editorial board of *The Sun-Bulletin*, some

state officials involved with the building's cleaning acknowledged that they have a major public relations campaign ahead of them. They seem, as well, to be learning that they can do more to restore public confidence in the state by meeting the public's questions head-on than they can by avoiding those questions.

As it intensifies its effort to clean the building, the state must also intensify its effort to keep information flowing to the people of this community. Any reticence on the state's part to answer the public's questions will, justifiably, be taken as a sign that it has something to hide.

# PIPE DREAM

VOL. XXXVI, NO. 6

SERVING BINGHAMTON'S UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1983

## SOB One Year Later: The Debate Continues

By Fred Handte

Tomorrow marks the second anniversary of the transformer fire that left the Binghamton State Office Building the largest contaminated building in the world. After two years no one knows how dangerous it is, no one knows if it will ever be safe and no one knows how many have been hurt already.

On February 5, 1981, an unknown electrical malfunction caused a fire in the transformer room of the SOB that raged for fifty minutes before service was shut down.

The fire caused the transformer's coolant, an oil heavily laden with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), to leak out of the machine. The oil leaked across switching gear that, according to firefighters, reached temperatures as high as 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

PCB oil was used in transformers until its prohibition in 1979 because it does not burn. What PCB's can do, however, when exposed to intense heat is vaporize. This is what happened in the SOB.

When PCB's vaporize, they break

down into:

- a series of other chemicals. In the SOB some of these chemicals were:

- PCB's themselves, known carcinogens banned in workplaces by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in any quantity exceeding trace amounts.

- dibenzofurans, one of the most deadly chemicals known to man.

- 2,3,7,8, tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin (TCDD) the most deadly chemical known.

The building has been closed since the fire, and many scientists and citizens have questioned the wisdom of ever reopening the building again.

Former Broome County Health Commissioner Dr. Arnold Schector, commissioner at the time of the fire, said that residents of Times Beach, Missouri, were told

recently by the US Center for Disease Control to abandon property contaminated with dioxins in concentrations of 1 part per billion or more, but that after the fire the SOB showed contamination levels of 10,000 parts per billion.

In other cases where buildings have been contaminated by dioxins, said Schector, the buildings have been abandoned. "This would be a reasonable solution from a health standpoint," he said.

The SOB is the largest building in the world contaminated with toxic chemicals.

Broome County consultant on the SOB Dr. John Buckley is optimistic about plans to open the building. Buckley said test results have shown great improvement over the past year as state crews have cleaned the building and

solution from a health standpoint," he said.

The SOB is the largest building in the world contaminated with toxic chemicals.

Broome County consultant on the SOB Dr. John Buckley is optimistic about plans to open the building. Buckley said test results have shown great improvement over the past year as state crews have cleaned the building and removed contaminated furniture and building materials. Moreover, Buckley said that the tests have shown that acceptable levels of dioxins are within the measureable range so that the building can be checked after the clean-up is completed.

Buckley said the standard that the state is using for the reopening of the building is 1/500 of the highest concentration that has never been shown to cause detrimental health effects in humans or animals.

Buckley was hired by the County to monitor for State Clean-up Procedures.

(Cont'd on page 21)



# SOB

(Cont'd from page 1)

## Clean-Up

Almost immediately after the fire, initial clean-up efforts began. At this time health officials believed that the building was merely contaminated with low levels of PCBs.

On February 25, two weeks after the presence of dioxins and furans were discovered, said Schector, the county and state released this information, and clean-up efforts were halted.

The building was then left empty until April 19 when the clean-up resumed; this time with the intent to totally gut the building of all furniture, artifacts, and removable building materials, including floor coverings, ceiling tiles, wallcoverings, and partitions.

This clean-up is still going on, combined with sophisticated methods of cleaning and vacuuming techniques designed to minimize the quantities of dioxins and other chemicals; some of which have penetrated as far as six inches into the basic concrete of the structure.

The cost of the effort to date is \$8.6 million. Governor Mario Cuomo has asked for an additional \$3 million in clean-up funds for his 1983-84 budget. Cuomo said that the state will spend whatever is necessary to make the building safe.

The original cost of the building in 1973 was \$16.8 million. The total cost of the fire will not be figured until the price of rebuilding the gutted structure is added in.

Buckley said he considers the clean-up to be progressing "satisfactorily." "As number of developments seem promising" he said. "The air tests are promising, the PCB levels are much lower than they were in the beginning and approaching those that would allow the building to reopen" said Buckley.

A member of the Citizens Committee on the SOB said, however, that she was concerned about the fact that the tests the state has used recently are taken from air

samples, not smear tests. She said "the air in the building is still because the ventilating system is shut down. Dioxins and the other chemicals in the building are heavy and would tend to show up in smaller quantities in still air."

Buckley countered that the tests so far have been preliminary and that air tests with the ventilation system on would be taken soon. He also said that a new form of wipe test was being developed for the SOB to mimic the actual rubbing of skin against surfaces. He said this test is desirable because dry wipe tests pick up less material than the skin and wipe tests using solvents pick up much more.

## Public Health

Larry Rosen, of the Citizens Committee said his main concern is for more comprehensive medical surveillance. "The state has assured us that if the building is ever reopened it will be safe. That won't be another two years anyway; the question now is what happen to the people who have been exposed already?" said Rosen.

The cleaning workers and carpenters who were sent into the building immediately after the fire were exposed to large doses of the chemicals and were given blood tests and medical care on demand. Now the state has followed up the original blood tests with a second set. On the basis of greatly lowered concentration of PCBs in the blood samples and the absence of any physical illnesses directly attributable to the fire, the state plans to discontinue tests and surveillance.

"It puzzles me that first stage surveillance has ended" said Schector. "The idea that if you don't have health problems you don't have to continue surveillance flies in the face of everything we know about the study of carcinogens," he said.

The Citizens Committee on the SOB has asked for:

- More blood tests, which test for PCBs
- Fat biopsies, which test for dioxins
- Urine tests, also helpful in determining levels of toxicity.

# The Evening Press

Binghamton, N.Y.

## Sore citizens second-guess and sue state

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the sixth part in a series marking the second anniversary of the transformer fire that contaminated the Binghamton State Office Building. Today's story examines citizen reaction to the state's handling of the crisis.*

By STEVE GEIMANN

It's a peculiarly American confrontation — a small band of citizens locked in a David-and-Goliath battle with government over an issue of public health.

The adversaries, in one case, are the Citizens Committee on the Binghamton State Office Building and the State of New York. The issue is the threat posed by the contaminated building in the heart of downtown Binghamton.

Every so often, the group aims a rock at the heart of the bureaucracy. More than once, that rock has scored a hit, convincing the state it should change its position.

## Monument in the making

Another group of people chose a different battlefield, aiming instead at the state's pocketbook. Their battle is waged in the courtroom with more than \$300 million hanging in the balance.

The citizens' committee — alarmed at what they consider an inadequate response by the state to the health hazards — has taken on the role of watchdog. They have not been reticent in their criticisms.

"People on the committee are alarmed," Charlotte Moran, a member of the committee, told a group of state officials last month.

The committee, for the most part, has been a quiet force. Although a string of spokesmen have criticized the state about some decisions, the group of state employees has shunned publicity, fearing reprisals by the state.

Tonight, the members and others will gather at The Markert Place to observe the second anniversary, complete with a birthday cake shaped like the building, right down to the windows.

See CITIZENS, Back Page

Four Sections

FINAL EDITION

FRIDAY

Feb. 4, 1983

# Citizens

Continued from 1A

The committee was formed late in 1981 to begin holding the state accountable for its actions. Several meetings were held, but the group's criticisms soon became little more than background noise.

Last year, the committee appealed for help from Dr. Ellen K. Silbergeld, chief toxicologist for the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington. Silbergeld stays in contact with the citizens and has been named to the 12-member expert panel formed by the state to study the cleaning and decontamination, another small victory for the citizens.

Silbergeld appeared at one meeting of the citizens' group, and this week asked the state to schedule another meeting of the expert panel to discuss the medical surveillance program. Silbergeld claims the program has failed to monitor the health of 400 people exposed to the toxic chemicals.

The committee has also turned to Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, former Broome County health commissioner, who, in his persistent questioning of the state's actions, has become something of a folk hero to committee proponents.

Schecter describes the state's risk assessment program, which set levels for safe reoccupancy, as a "black art" and has demanded a more thorough surveillance of health effects from exposure to the building's toxic chemicals.

"I guess as long as Arnie Schecter is around, we don't have anything to worry about," said one state worker who did not wish to be named.

Schecter was not always so well liked. In the first weeks after the fire, Schecter was at first supportive of the state and issued statements minimizing the health dangers.

Twelve days after the fire and explosions, Schecter joined the state to remind residents that "nothing is completely safe."

Schecter, who has become the leading critic of the medical surveillance programs, once said the program was "just a precaution."

However, Schecter's troubles with his boss, County Executive Carl S. Young, and his removal as health commissioner turned his loyalty into opposition.

A recent meeting between state Health Department officials was dominated by Schecter, who peppered officials with comments and questions.

Schecter has already participated in several international panel discussions on dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls as an expert on the Binghamton accident.

Schecter will be in Helsinki, Finland, next September to discuss the occupational hazards created by PCBs, dioxins and furans.

Last year, Schecter went to Seveso, Italy, to discuss the 1976 chemical accident in that community, and has participated in several panels in the U.S. on dioxin.

Perhaps a more central concern to the state are the civil lawsuits spawned by the accident.

The state has been named as a defendant in lawsuits totaling about \$938 million. The litigants include a cross-section of state workers, city employees, people sent into the building to make emergency repairs as well as businesses which suffered losses.

Most state workers claim negligence by the state for ordering workers into the building without warning of potential health risks. City employees claim their health is in jeopardy because the state allowed cleanup crews to track the toxic material into City Hall.

Yesterday, Broome County sued the state for \$56,445.11 to recover \$28,653 in wages lost while the county office building was closed plus \$21,852 in lost revenue from parking.

In a similar suit, the City of Binghamton sued the state earlier this week for \$200,000 for damages caused by the fire. The claim includes workdays lost and other costs related to the city's role in the days after the incident.

In December, New York Telephone Co. filed suit seeking \$218,308 for equipment lost after the fire.

Less significant but perhaps representative of the problem is a suit filed by a group of city and county workers who lost prime parking space. They have filed a class action suit, seeking refunds of \$300 and \$400 for workers forced to find other parking.

The biggest claims were filed shortly after the accident by four maintenance workers for the Office of General Services who were directed to re-enter the building. They're seeking \$400 million from the state.

Michele E. Weidman, a city worker who was pregnant at the time of the accident, is suing for \$310 million. In the original suit, Weidman sought \$80 million for her unborn child.

The state has already settled \$50,000 in personal claims for personal property owned by state workers and lost after the fire.

The state, however, claims it is not planning to file any lawsuits on its own seeking to recover damages.

"There is still too little evidence to determine the cause of the fire," said Nathan Riley, a spokesman for the state Attorney General's Office. "No litigation is planned at this time, and it's even less likely we'll file charges."

The state hired two electrical engineers as consultants after the fire to help defend itself from nearly \$1 billion in lawsuits and to prepare any lawsuits on behalf of the state.

Tomorrow: An uncertain future looms.

# Tower's fate adds to enigma

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the last part in a series marking the second anniversary of the transformer fire that contaminated the Binghamton State Office Building. Today's story looks to the future.

By STEVE GEIMANN

Two years is a long time.

It takes just under two years for an elephant to give birth, for a community college student to earn a degree and for Mars to circle the sun.

It also has taken two years to clean half the floors in Binghamton's contaminated state office building.

Two years ago today, the 18-story office tower was contaminated with highly toxic chemicals after a fire and explosion in basement electrical equipment.

Today, its future as a downtown office building remains uncertain; officials are only sure they will continue the cleaning process.

Instead of being the home for state government in

## Monument in the making

Broome County, the office tower is a landmark to a chemical foul-up, a monument in the making.

It's still not certain what triggered the series of electrical malfunctions that began shortly before dawn two years ago today. The only evidence was hastily discarded during the initial cleaning.

Officials still don't know why an airshaft near the men's bathroom was open in the room with the electrical transformer.

See TOWER, Back Page

## Tower

Continued from 1A

Binghamton architect John B. Cummings, chief architect of the project, said the shaft was not open in any plans he approved. His firm did not inspect the building after it was constructed.

Questions also surround the future of the building, which once was the landmark of a new downtown Binghamton.

Officials have not said how clean floors and desks must be before workers will be allowed to return.

A citizens watchdog committee is worried that a slip-shod medical surveillance program will seriously hamper efforts to monitor their health.

State officials recently estimated the building will not be clean until this summer, and will be not be rebuilt and ready to open until early 1985, four years after the fire.

State workers and city residents exposed to the chemicals face an uncertain future, wondering about their own health, and the health of their families.

In two years, doctors and scientists have been unable to answer questions about the effects of the deadly chemicals produced when oil from an electrical transformer was vaporized into dioxin and dibenzofuran, two of the deadliest chemicals known to man.

One costly lesson has been learned in two years: the state and its taxpayers have spent at least \$8.6 million to test air and surfaces.

The lesson was not lost on the state. One month

after the fire, officials issued an interim evacuation policy that is designed to avoid repeating mistakes made in Binghamton.

The policy, issued by the Office of General Services, requires full tests and consultation with the Department of Health before a building is reopened.

"It (the Binghamton accident) was a learning experience," said John F. Hudacs, executive deputy director, Office of General Services. "If this happened again, we would do this differently."

The state health department has spent \$80,200 for tests on the building and people. Of that total, \$60,000 was spent to analyze blood samples for polychlorinated biphenyls, the main chemical found in the soot.

New York's lesson has not been ignored by other states and countries, or by firefighters who might face the same hazard in another building transformer fire.

Deputy Binghamton Fire Chief Donald A. Faughnan, who was in command two years ago today, has received calls from around the country asking for advice. Faughnan has provided such help more than once.

Officials of Versar Inc., the consultant hired by the state for the decontamination, have received inquiries from as far away as Finland.

Robert A. Westin, chemical engineer, said a representative of the Soviet Union, working through a third party, has sought information about Binghamton. Attempts to learn more about the Soviets' interest have been unsuccessful.

# The Saturday Press

Binghamton, N.Y.

25 cents

## SATURDAY

Feb. 5, 1983



KEITH HITCHENS

Government workers prepare to cut the cake while marking the second anniversary of the shutdown of the State Office Building yesterday.

## Tainted tower's cleanup calendar

By STEVE GEIMANN

It's been 723 days since the Binghamton State Office Building was last open for business. It's likely to remain closed for at least another 18 months. Here are some significant dates in the downtown toxic chemical crisis:

1981

Feb. 5: A pre-dawn fire in equipment which distributes power in the state office tower damages a transformer cooled with polychlorinated biphenyls, causing about 100 gallons of liquid to spatter on the floor, walls and ceilings of the building. The fire is first detected at 5:35 a.m., and the two workers inside are evacuated. By 7 a.m., the state, county and city buildings are closed.

Feb. 9: City Hall reopens. The county building reopens the following day. The cleaning inside the office tower begins with state maintenance workers.

See PCBS, 2B

man said, Mar...  
able to cut the...  
er to the...  
Marlowe, 1B

## Employees mark shutdown of tower

By STEVE GEIMANN

A downtown Binghamton bar turned into a smoky party room last night when a large crowd marked the second anniversary of the Binghamton State Office Building contamination crisis.

The crowd of about 125 persons, including many government workers, sang a song written by a critic of the state's work and ate a cake shaped like the state office building.

The fate of the 18-story tower dominated conversations at the party, held at The Markert Place, 81 State St.

There were no speeches, just a song written by Patricia A. Zemenak, an active member of the citizens committee on the cleanup, who criticized the state's work and Gov. Hugh L. Carey, who once offered to drink a glass of PCBs.

In a related development, Zemenak and Lois Whittemore, the security guard on duty the night of the fire, criticized the state's cleaning effort during an appearance on WSKG last night.

Zemenak said the state's assertion that at least 100 grams of fat tissue is required for a biopsy of dioxin contamination is "misleading."

Zemenak said Dr. Mary Wolff, environmental health expert at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York, claimed only 10 grams is needed for such an analysis. However, Wolff told *The Evening Press* a 100-gram fat tissue sample was not unreasonable.

Whittemore said the state had spent too much money cleaning and not enough money to check people's health.

"I think those people are a little more important than a building," she said.

As for the song, former radio personality Phil Markert, the bar's proprietor, led the group to the tune of "On the Sunny Side of the Street" with the following words:

*"Grab your coat and get your hat  
Leave your PCBs on the doorstep  
Just direct your feet  
To the cleaner side of the street  
We used to walk in that place  
Before it was such a disgrace  
Now we'll never show our face  
They blew it! They knew it!  
If we never have a cent  
We won't drink with Governor Carey  
No soot on our feet  
On the cleaner side of the street."*

# The Saturday Press

Binghamton, N.Y.

25 cents

FINAL EDITION

SATURDAY

Feb. 5, 1992

Four Sections

## Pcbs

Continued from 1B

Feb. 14: Tests reveal soot and ash on every surface of the building contains 10 percent PCBs. The cleanup continues.

Feb. 17: Binghamton firefighters are called to The Fairbanks Co. on Glenwood Ave. to extinguish a fire in a PCB-cooled transformer on the roof.

Feb. 25: The intense cleanup starts after the fire is halted after tests confirm the presence in the soot and ash of two highly toxic and potentially lethal chemicals, dioxins and dibenzofurans.

March 5: Gov. Hugh L. Carey earns himself a reputation by offering to "swallow an entire glass of PCBs" and help clean the building with a few willing hands.

March 18: U.S. Environmental Protection Administration fly to Binghamton to inspect building. However, federal budget cuts prevent more active involvement.

March 18: State spends the first \$1 million.

April 1: Versar Inc. of Virginia hired as special consultant.

April 3: Thirteen experts in dioxin contamination and PCBs meet at LaGuardia Airport in New York City to discuss the crisis and suggest solutions. They suggest more tests.

April 27: Fire in a capacitor at City Hall spills a minute amount of PCBs, forcing the building to be closed.

May 7: First of two dozen lawsuits filed against the state claiming negligence and seeking \$900 million.

June 24: Broome County Executive Carl S. Young decides not to reappoint Health Commissioner Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, but will retain Schecter as special consultant.

Aug. 18: State and local government leaders meet in Binghamton for the first time since the fire to discuss the crisis.

Sept. 8: Special air filters are lifted by helicopter to the top of the office building.

Oct. 1: Broome County Legislature votes 11-7 against hiring Schecter as \$12,000-a-year special consultant on the contamination. Two weeks later, Young appoints John L. Buckley, an environmentalist, as \$300-a-day consultant.

Oct. 7: Allwast of Syracuse Inc. is hired by the state to remove soot and ash and to decontaminate tower.

Oct. 9: Dr. Richard Ilika, state health department analyst, quits claiming the state has bogged the cleaning and health monitoring.

Oct. 22: Carey makes his first trip to Binghamton in almost a year and indirectly apologizes for flippancy remarks. Carey declares: "We will not do this on a bargain basement basis."

Oct. 28: Citizens Committee on the Binghamton State Office Building, an ad hoc group, holds its first meeting to keep tabs on the cleaning.

Oct. 30: State begins medical surveillance program for 475 people exposed to chemicals inside the building. The first results are mailed more than a year later.

Nov. 4: State Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod promises second citizens committee meeting the office tower will be cleaned and workers will face no greater health risks than workers in any other building.

Dec. 7: Broome County parking garage reopens for the second time after extensive cleaning.

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Jan. 6: Green icicles form from the slow leakage of fluid from the floors of the building are noticed outside the tower. The same day, \$3,000 is reported missing from a state safe.

Feb. 1: Air is released from the building using a complex filtering system.

March 17: Hundreds of thousands of records are buried after state decided the papers cannot be decontaminated.

March 19: City officials report finding PCBs of the type used in state office tower transformer.

March 29: Experts reconvene in Binghamton to discuss the progress of health tests and to consider reentry guidelines devised by the state. Some experts criticize state for not beginning animal tests promised a year ago.

May: Workers involved in the cleaning report incidents of crabs and lice from using the same protective gear.

Member of respirator masks stills state the wrong kind of material is being used.

June 18: Leaders of labor unions representing state workers calls for an independent federal agency, National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, to assume control of health monitoring.

July 14: State reverses position and begins releasing test and other information about the success of the cleaning.

July 22: City finds two small leaks in the subbasement of City Hall near the connection with the state office building. The leaks allowed PCBs to flow into City Hall.

Aug. 18: Two workers fall from a scaffold while working inside the building. Both are decontaminated before being taken to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital.

Sept. 14: First of more than 1,200 barrels of toxic waste leave the office tower for a secure landfill in Niagara Falls.

Oct. 21: State releases preliminary analysis of blood samples showing no adverse health effects from exposure to PCBs. No tests on dioxin and dibenzofuran.

Oct. 23: Citizens committee sharply criticizes state and its plans for health testing, calls for fat tissue biopsies to detect PCBs and other toxic chemicals.

Dec. 2 Labor union leaders, a public interest group and the ad hoc citizens committee denounce the panel of experts as biased in favor of the state.

Dec. 9: State issues final report on blood samples, claims no ill effects. A Washington toxicologists challenges state results, claims the analysis is invalid.

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Jan. 9: First tests of air from cleanest floor in the building show signs of deadly chemicals. State declares the cleaning is working and predicts the building will reopen.

Jan. 10: State officials decide to rip out floor tiles on all 18 floors of the tower. PCBs cannot be removed, despite repeated washing with an industrial solvent.

Jan. 12: CBS News broadcast account of dioxin contamination in Binghamton — first national publicity since the fire.