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Protest continues at 'landfill' schools

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PROVIDENCE -- Two years after the city began building three schools atop a former landfill on Springfield Street, a group of parents and community organizers say they have not given up their fight to have the schools closed or made safe.

In fact, they say, their objections to the schools are bolstered by a recent report by the Virginia-based Center for Health, Environment and Justice, as part of its "poisoned schools campaign." The campaign is being led by Lois Gibbs, an activist who spearheaded a movement to relocate residents of Love Canal, after it was learned that houses and a school were built on a toxic waste dump in Niagra Falls, N.Y.

In the report -- dubbed "Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions" -- Providence is singled out as being a "leader" in constructing schools on contaminated land.

Besides the elementary and two middle schools near the corner of Springfield Street and Hartford Avenue, the report also mentions the Robert Bailey Elementary School. Bailey was built last year on the site of a former Gordon Avenue factory that was destroyed by fire in 1996.

The group and their lawyer, Steven Fischbach, held a news conference in the parking lot of the Springfield middle schools yesterday.

"About a year and a half ago, I joined an effort to stop the construction of the school you are standing in front of today," said Nicolas Marsella, who lives across from the middle schools. "I opposed building the schools on a garbage dump because garbage dumps contain poisonous materials. No one can guarantee that the children who will attend those schools for the next 50 years will never come into contact with poisons. It makes no sense to put kids in harm's way."

Marsella and three other plaintiffs filed a lawsuit to stop construction of the schools in the summer of 1999. After a hearing that August, a Superior Court judge allowed the city to continue building the schools, but placed restrictions on construction and required ongoing monitoring of the site.

Alan Sepe, the city's acting director of public properties, said the city did everything required to clean up the site and make it safe for students.

The remediation plan -- which was approved by the state Department of Environmental Management -- included putting down two to four feet of clean soil and incorporating a gas-extraction system in the ground beneath the schools. Sepe said the schools are also monitored regularly to ensure that gases do not emanate from beneath the soil.

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