

## Old factory causing headaches for residents

BY TERRY PENDER, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — For nearly 20 years, Claudia Fitzgerald watched the abandoned factory across the street from her family home slowly deteriorate.

What the mother of two could not see were underground plumes of contaminants slowly moving outward from the old four-storey industrial building at Shanley and Duke streets.

"I am very concerned about our health, I have two children who have asthma," Fitzgerald said.

The plumes — comprised mostly of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene — have spread north and west of the old factory, a couple metres below the handsome brick homes and narrow, tree-shaded streets.

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment ordered the owners to clean up the pollution. In response, the registered owners — 848835 Ontario Inc. — declared bankruptcy. Back taxes total more than \$600,000 and the City of Kitchener expects to put the building up for a tax sale late this year or early next.

"They have found contamination under Wilhelm Street and Duke Street. We are worried the contaminants will get into our houses," Fitzgerald said.

The Ministry of the Environment is also worried.

Vapours from the trichloroethylene could leak into some houses and build up to dangerous levels, particularly in the winter when windows are closed. The Ministry of the Environment offered to do air-quality testing in 35 homes, but only two property owners consented.

Testing in those two homes did not find anything to be concerned about at this point. But the ministry wants to do more testing this winter.

"I am definitely going to be one to have my house tested," Kay Vollett, of 385 Duke St. W., said.

The ministry has tapped into its Environmental Clean-up Fund to pay for the testing and studies. This is a fund of last resort for assessing and cleaning up contaminated sites that are abandoned or where owners have refused to comply with cleanup orders.

Testing must demonstrate there is a threat to human health, groundwater or the environment before the Environmental Clean-Up Fund can be used to dig up the contaminated soil and truck it away.

"Something needs to be done. It's been going on too long. The neighbourhood residents are the meat in the sandwich here," Vollett said.

When the building goes up for a tax sale, the minimum bid must equal the back taxes of more than \$600,000. The new owner would then have to clean up the site.

Waterloo Region provides funds to help pay for the cleanup, but until it's known how much the cleanup will cost, nobody can say if that program would make any redevelopment of the site profitable for a builder.

From the sidewalk, the building appears to be a prime candidate for conversion into residential units, perhaps with a coffee shop and service retailers on the main floor. Brick walls with lots of windows rise four-floors above the leafy neighbourhood.

If it can't be redeveloped into a mixed-use building, neighbours want it razed and replaced with a park, maybe even a parking lot.

"We want it developed or demolished," Vollett said.

Nobody cuts the grass in the summer. Nobody shovels the sidewalks in the winter. Homeless people break into the building and sometimes light fires for warmth.

"It is an eyesore," Vollett said.

The houses around the abandoned factory were built 90 to 120 years ago. The factory was built in the 1920s. Electrohome manufactured hardwood-television cabinets there for decades. After that a manufacturer of moulded products moved in. The final company to use the building painted letters on signs and vehicles. It has sat empty for about 20 years now.

At some point a hole was cut into the concrete floor where solvents and paints were dumped.

Gerry Schwartz moved into his home at 406 Duke St. W. about 43 years ago. From his front porch directly across the street from the factory, Schwartz watched all of the companies come and go.

"It is a big headache that someone should take care of very soon," Schwartz said of the old factory.

"I cannot sell my house. About 10 years ago my wife and I were going to sell and move on. When someone came to look at the house the first thing they said was: 'What's that across the street?'" Schwartz, 73, said.



Peter Lee, Record staff  
Neighbourhood residents Joan Lazarski (left) and Kay Vollett stand in front of an old industrial building at Shanley and Duke streets.

Schwartz had the air tested inside his house and it proved to be fine.

For about 12 years, Joan Lazarski has lived at 463 Duke St., just down the street from the factory.

For her, the studies by the Ministry of the Environment and the pending tax sale by the City of Kitchener are reasons for optimism.

For the first time the neighbours now know the extent of the contamination.

"It is not as dire as one might think," Lazarski said. "To learn real facts and real information is better than conjecture and worry."

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