



## THE LANDFILL ISSUE; WHO TO BELIEVE?

A number of Bridgeton residents are confused; and some angry, regarding all the news and activity surrounding the Bridgeton and West Lake landfills operating in the city. There seems to be an endless number of articles and stories in the media about conditions at these facilities and their impact on the citizens. Each account sites "experts" in the area of solid waste management and/or the environment and each, it seems, says something completely opposite of what the other "expert" said; thus the confusion and the question about who to believe.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The Bridgeton and West Lake landfills are located side-by-side off St. Charles Rock Road in the western portion of the City of Bridgeton. Both had been active landfills, but have not accepted trash or construction debris for years. You may ask then why trash trucks continue to go into the landfill nearly every day. Republic Services, owner of the landfill and a major solid waste management (trash) company operating in the area, maintains a trash transfer station inside the landfill. Trash is sorted and then shipped off the Bridgeton Landfill site for disposal at other landfills.

Back in 2010, state and local authorities, along with Republic Services noticed higher temperatures coming from the landfill. Eventually, it was confirmed that an underground fire, or as Republic Services calls it a Subsurface Smoldering Event (SSE) was

taking place in the Bridgeton Landfill. See what we are talking about in terms of conflicting reports! At this time, citizen reports about odors coming from the landfill were increasing. There were always odors at the landfill, but not to this level.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MoDNR) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took note of the problem and the state, through the Missouri Attorney General's office, filed suit to require Republic Services to develop a

plan to minimize the odors and contain and put out the fire/SSE. At this point, the fire was and remains contained in the Bridgeton Landfill. The West Lake Landfill is next to the Bridgeton Landfill and is also owned by Republic. Back in 1973, radioactive material from another radioactive cleanup site in St. Louis County was placed in West Lake without any liners or safeguards. This material can be traced back to Mallinckrodt Chemical Company

and the company's involvement in the development of the first atomic bomb in World War II. The development of radioactive materials was done at the request of the federal government.

Is the fire or SSE moving toward the radioactive material? The fire/SSE has spread in the Bridgeton Landfill and according to temperature monitors is closer to the West Lake Landfill than when it first started. But it is not in the West Lake landfill and still has hundreds of feet to go if it ever reached it. Documents released by Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster stated the fire/SSE is closer and, in worst case scenario, could reach West Lake Landfill in two to six months. Note the use of the words "could" and "worst case scenario."

Some people have taken the attorney general's information and claimed the fire/SSE will reach the landfill in two to six months. That is just not true. No one knows how fast or slow the fire/SSE is moving. At times, monitors on the site indicate higher temperatures and possible movement, but then the temperature drops indicating no spreading of the fire/SSE. Again, who to believe.

### EMERGENCY AND EVACUATION PLANNING

The first and foremost responsibility of the City of Bridgeton is the protection and safety of its residents. The first responders serving the community, Bridgeton Police, Pattonville and Robertson fire protection districts and St. Louis County Emergency services have been meeting ever since the fire/SSE began to plan for any event that may take place. This is good planning; prepare for the worst, but hope for the best!

Some details of the Emergency and Evacuation plan were recently released. Not all details were shown because there are too many unknown factors that could occur and change plans. For example, if the wind shifts in a certain direction, it may change any evacuation route, if the humidity that day is high, plans could change; you get the picture.

The plan did reference a "shelter in place" procedure. That means residents, schools and businesses should seal their homes, buildings and facilities to prevent outside air from coming inside. In the event of something happening at the West Lake Landfill that would create a cloud of material in the air possibly contaminating the outside air, shelter in place could help prevent residents from coming into contact with the contaminated air. Until an all clear is given by first responders, citizens would be required to stay inside.

The first responders, the Bridgeton Police, Pattonville and Robertson fire protection districts and St. Louis County Emergency Management Services (EMS), **WILL ALERT THE PUBLIC** should there be a problem that threatens public safety. The Missouri Department of Natural Resources monitors the landfill site on a 24 hour basis, seven days a week. MoDNR staff along with the landfill operator will notify first responders immediately should the need arise.

### JUST HOW SAFE IS IT LIVING NEAR THE LANDFILL?

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a federal health agency, recently released the findings of its study of the area in and around the West Lake Landfill. The study focused on groundwater, air and soil samples and was conducted at the request of EPA. The ATSDR study found:

- The contaminated material in West Lake is still on the landfill site and has not traveled outside the boundaries of the landfill to surrounding residential and business properties. This is different from one of the attorney general's report which said some

vegetation outside the fence around West Lake Landfill showed signs of contamination.

- Air samples showed no signs of the contamination off site.
- Groundwater draining off the grounds of the West Lake Landfill will not harm people's health and is not being used as a public water supply.
- Outdoor radon gas near the landfill is higher than typical levels, but is not high enough to harm people's health.

The study did state that anyone working on the West Lake Landfill site might be exposed to harmful contaminants if they breath dust developed from digging or other soil disturbances and that radon gas released at the landfill and breathed-in by workers might impact the health of past, current and future **workers on site**. This only applies to workers on the landfill property

ATSDR said in its report that it would continue monitoring soil, water and air on and near the landfill to protect the public against any possible contamination. This report is different from what some people having been saying in the media about the "immediate danger" the landfill presents to residents.

### WHAT NEXT?

All parties want the fire in the Bridgeton Landfill put out. But, no one is sure how long it will take. Most underground landfill fires simply "burn themselves out" and cannot be extinguished by water or foam. The method most often used to put out an underground fire is to deny oxygen to the fire. Republic Services, the owner, has spent millions of dollars to contain the fire and plans to extinguish it. However, Republic Services cannot provide a schedule on when the fire/SSE will end.

As to the radioactive material at the West Lake Landfill, the Bridgeton City Council and the mayor continue to call upon the federal government to acknowledge its responsibility in this matter and either remove the material or insure it is more safely contained by sealing it in air and water tight containment vaults. The federal government helped create this mess and it is time for it to correct it.

However, at some point, we need to trust what the experts/scientists and those most knowledgeable about landfill fires and hazardous waste containment. Just because a recognized scientist/s does say exactly what we want to hear does not mean that the scientist/s' findings are wrong. Be objective when you review the information and then come to a decision on who to believe.

With all the conflicting information being released on the landfill issue, it is hard to determine who to believe. At some point, we need to rely on the experts/scientists and those most knowledgeable about landfill fires and hazardous waste containment for answers. Additionally, the city will publish articles, like this one, in the Banner to try to objectively keep residents informed about landfill developments.

