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## Experimental Demolition of Asbestos-Laced Motel Delayed

### Test of cheaper FW method awaits state, federal approval

By Jeff Mosier

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FORT WORTH - The experimental demolition of an abandoned motel containing asbestos won't happen this summer and could be postponed for at least a year or longer, state and local officials said.

The test of the Fort Worth method, an asbestos-abatement technique that is cheaper than the existing federal standard, was scheduled for July at the Cowtown Inn in the Handley area of east Fort Worth.

The proposal, however, must be approved first by the Environmental Protection Agency and then by the Texas Department of Health, which state officials said couldn't happen until at least the fall. City officials said they could only conduct the experiment only during the summer because the motel is next to a church school.

"The EPA told us that as an extra precaution, we needed

to wait until school was out," said Kathryn Hansen, regulatory/environmental coordinator for the city.

Mark Hansen, chief of the toxics enforcement section for the EPA in Dallas, said it could take a couple of weeks before his agency approves the Fort Worth method documents. He said that federal officials will try to talk the state into expediting the process, but he doesn't have any guarantees.

Todd Wingler, chief of the Asbestos Program Branch at the state health department, said that its board meets at the beginning of July, but then won't meet again until the fall as the agency is reorganizing. He said his staff would have to review the research before sending it to the board.

"I couldn't see how we could get it [Fort Worth method] to the board even if we had the documents now," he said.

Alan Morris, head of the Toxic Substances Control Division at the health

department, agreed that it's too late to get state approval this summer.

EPA officials said the demolition would take about 25 days, which means they would have to start the work at the beginning of August to finish before school starts. Federal and city officials said they didn't know what would happen to the project if the demolition doesn't occur this summer.

Opponents of the experiment said the delay is a start, but they are still pushing to stop the project entirely. Environmental activists and labor groups said the unproven method could endanger the health of nearby residents if asbestos is released from the site. Asbestos is a carcinogen for which there is no known safe level of exposure.

Residents have circulated a petition opposing the plan and have collected the signatures of more than 230 Fort Worth residents, many of them from the Handley area. They also have taken their

case to state regulators in Austin.

“Citizens are getting much more fully informed on what the true risks of these experiments are,” said Jim Hecker, environmental enforcement director of Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. “Before, they didn’t know that EPA’s own scientists were condemning this experiment.”

Environmental groups obtained EPA documents last month in which scientists criticized the Fort Worth method and said it could harm nearby residents.

The documents included comments from an independent peer-review panel created by the EPA to examine the Fort Worth method. The EPA presented a copy of the Fort Worth method documents to the public at an open house Thursday at the Handley-Meadowbrook Community Center.

EPA officials said other scientists have endorsed the experiment, and they were still fine-tuning the Fort Worth method to address some of the concerns.

Current law requires that asbestos-containing materials be removed from a building before it’s demolished. The Fort Worth method allows the city to tear down a building without removing most of the

asbestos first. To prevent the demolition from creating a dust cloud laced with asbestos, the building is wetted with fire hoses before and during the demolition process. The method does require the removal of some materials that contain asbestos and wouldn’t easily absorb water be removed first.

Critics said the EPA should experiment with this method in an isolated location, away from people.

The opponents are attacking this project both in Fort Worth and Austin. They are rallying local opposition through meetings at a Handley church and circulating petitions.

Also, a Fort Worth area asbestos workers labor union sent a letter this week to the Texas Department of Health claiming that the state can only allow the Fort Worth method experiment if the EPA has exempted it from the federal rules or if the department determines that it will provide equivalent protection to the federal rules.

The letter claims that neither apply. It quotes city of Fort Worth documents that ask the EPA to waive enforcement of asbestos safety rules rather than grant an exemption. Also, the opponents said that peer review documents

indicate that the method wouldn’t be equivalent to the existing standards.

Mr. Hansen said the debate about whether this is an exemption or discretionary enforcement is only a debate over semantics. He said that the state law allows the health department to approve the Fort Worth method.

The letter to the head of health department’s Toxic Substances Control Division also said that the city’s decision to remove some potentially asbestos-containing [vermiculite] in the ceiling texture, which they said was just discovered this month, could affect the results of the test.

“That’s a rigged experiment,” Mr. Hecker said. “It doesn’t prove that this is an effective method.”

City officials said they decided to remove the vermiculite ceiling coating since that was never noted in previous documents. The material hasn’t been tested with the latest methods, but environmental groups said that most vermiculite in this area is tainted with tremolite, a type of asbestos.

“We have to remove it because the public hasn’t had an opportunity to comment on it,” Ms. Hansen said. “That was the only fair thing to do since it didn’t go through the process.”