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Dumont contamination taints election

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DUMONT — Mayor Matthew McHale has sent letters to the governor and the state attorney general criticizing the handling of long-standing contamination at the Department of Public Works.

The move was dismissed by Republicans as a Democratic political ploy timed to influence a council election.

McHale's letter late last week to Attorney General Paula Dow requested an investigation of the way a prior Republican administration handled the contamination.

"It has become apparent that the borough will incur significant liability for the continued remediation, that there may be health and property damage issues that could present themselves and as mayor of the borough, I am obligated to bring these issues to the attention of your office," the letter said.

24-year history

The pollution became public at a council meeting last week, when the governing body discussed a Sept. 29 letter from the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The letter detailed a 24-year history of groundwater and soil contamination from spills and leaks from underground fuel storage tanks.

Officials said they learned detailed information about the contamination for the first time from the letter, and that no records about the pollution were on file in Borough Hall.

Borough Administrator John Perkins said he has since retrieved records from a law firm that represented the borough in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

McHale's letter to Christie said he found it "unsettling that such a significant environmental hazard could remain open without follow-up from any state authorities for a period of nine years "

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Republicans protest

Republicans are incensed at what they see as an attempt to discredit their party before an election. Several Republicans have questioned whether the late-September letter was really the first time the contamination was brought to the borough's attention.

"This is a political tactic — something was thrown up against the wall to see what would stick," said William Bochicchio, a former mayor who is running for council this year. "To give people in town a false idea of what happened as a fear tactic to vote Democratic really bothers me."

McHale denied that the timing was political.

"After nine years of not hearing from the DEP, I did not ask them to send a letter on Sept. 29," McHale said. "This is the last thing I wanted the community to deal with, whether it's October or January."

Bochicchio was elected to the council in 1985 and was mayor in 1986 and 1987. The first leaking tank was discovered in 1986, and was removed along with contaminated soil in 1987.

But most of the testing that revealed more extensive leaks and groundwater contamination occurred in the early 1990s,

after another leaking tank was found in 1990, the DEP letter said.

Republican Donald Winant was mayor from 1992 until resigning in 2005. McHale, a Democrat, was elected later that year and has said he did not know about the contamination until recently

Bochicchio and other Republicans interviewed since the contamination became public have pointed to records of inspections and violations on the DEP's website that they say raise questions about what current Democrats knew and when.

The website shows that inspectors issued violations at the DPW in 2005 and 2008. The records appear to refer to inspections of existing tanks, and it is not clear whether inspectors visited the property because of the ongoing contamination issues. A DEP spokesman could not provide clarification Monday.

In 2008, the borough was issued three violations, including for not maintaining

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records and not performing certain tests.

In 2005, the borough received eight citations for things such as unmarked fill ports, failure to test and inspect the tanks and expired tank registrations.

"There isn't one issue on any of these pages to suggest that it's in relation to the stuff that was going on back in 2000," said Borough Administrator John Perkins.

Perkins said he found out about the contamination when DEP inspectors visited in July. He said he assumed the inspectors were looking into a separate environmental issue that the borough had reported at nearby Twin-Boro Field, but inspectors said they were trying to close out an older file.

Perkins said the officials did not give details about the pollution, but said a follow-up letter would come in 45 days.

Perkins said he briefed the council on the July inspection but that the detailed letter did not come until after a subsequent visit Sept. 16.

Cleanup plans

The DEP letter said groundwater testing and soil sampling occurred on and off from 1991 until at least 1994, and that two sets of

consultants drafted cleanup plans in the 1990s. The last plan was submitted to the DEP in 1998. By then, the borough had signed a memorandum of agreement to clean up the site.

The DEP suggested changes to the cleanup plan in 1999 and terminated the agreement in 2000 after not getting a response, the letter said. The DEP letter mentions no action at the site after that date.

Jack Eckel, Dumont's former chief of staff, said Monday that he did not recall the memorandum of agreement with the DEP, or its termination.

Correspondence provided to the borough by its former law firm shows that an attorney there addressed letters to Eckel in 2001 and 2002 asking for direction on what to do about the DPW contamination and terminated agreement. No response appears in the borough's files.

Former Mayor Donald Winant said in an interview last week that the borough could

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not have simply ignored the DEP.

"We went through years and years and years of investigation," Winant said, adding later, "With the DEP, you can't just drop the ball."

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