

Schools not joining asbestos-related suit

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

Farmington Public Schools has no plans to join other Michigan school districts in a class action lawsuit against asbestos producers and suppliers. "We haven't had a serious problem here," Farmington Superintendent Lewis Schulman said. "We have been monitoring it like crazy for years."

About a year ago, school officials, on advice of the district's legal counsel, decided not to become involved in the

suit. Joining the suit would probably cost the 19,000-student district more than the \$7,000 spent on identifying and correcting asbestos problems in the district, Schulman said.

Asbestos is a fibrous insulating material that has been linked to various lung diseases and cancer. The material has been used in building construction because of its fire resistance and strength and because it's lightweight.

Bloomfield Hills School District and Roper City and Country Schools are among the dozen public and private schools that initiated the lawsuit in Wayne County Circuit Court.

Circuit Judge James Mies issued his ruling Sept. 8 to allow any public or non-public schools to join the lawsuit, according to Birmingham attorney Michael Serling. The school districts will be notified by the court, but not until a written order is entered by the judge.

SERLING is an asbestos law expert representing the school districts. This is the first time a statewide class action has been ordered on asbestos in the schools, Serling said.

The state class action will be set up so that participating school districts must drop out of a national class action

'We haven't had a serious (asbestos) problem here. We have been monitoring it like crazy for years.'

— Lewis Schulman
superintendent of schools

suit targeting the large asbestos-producing Manville Corp. Mies ruled.

Although school officials were advised last year to avoid joining the national suit, Schulman said there was no need to bring the issue before the Farmington Board of Education again in light of the state class action.

Beginning five years ago, Farmington school officials took steps to cut the peril of asbestos by finding and "encapsulating" it where it was used around boilers and pipes in many buildings built before 1965.

"We've had very little incidence," said Jack Lawing, Farmington administrative services director. "They didn't correct many of our schools using asbestos. We did find it in a lot of loca-

tions. But it was confined to areas such as boiler rooms and piping."

A THREE-LEVEL search for asbestos included an informal search of buildings by principals and custodians. An architect and then district supervisory staff conducted the hunt, Lawing said.

The search in student areas of the district's buildings revealed that asbes-

tos was present in the ceiling of the library at Woodcreek Elementary School and in an office and storage area at Forest Elementary. It was also found in the Farmington Training Center, he said.

The search was completed with the help of a private firm, Thurst Thermal Systems, which looked for and took samples of asbestos suspected of being friable (capable of becoming airborne), Lawing said. Friable asbestos can become airborne by chipping, flaking, peeling or crumbling.

The search also identified the presence of asbestos in the boiler rooms of at least 18 of the district's 24 buildings.

Despite the extensive search, very little of the asbestos was removed. Where it was removed, such as on piping in the various buildings, a contractor was hired.

But in student areas such as the Woodcreek Elementary library, the asbestos was encapsulated — making the material solid by adding a solution similar to glue. Making asbestos a solid prevents it from becoming airborne, Lawing said. "That is far superior to removing it." There is more danger in removing it," Lawing said.

THE STATE suit is a "forum to recoup damages as a result of friable asbestos or asbestos that must be removed," Serling said.

Several of the districts that initiated the lawsuit have spent large sums of money just this past summer removing or covering up the dangerous material, Serling said.

Among the districts that have joined the suit are Detroit, Flint, Lansing, Saginaw and Akiva Hebrew Day in Lathrup Village.

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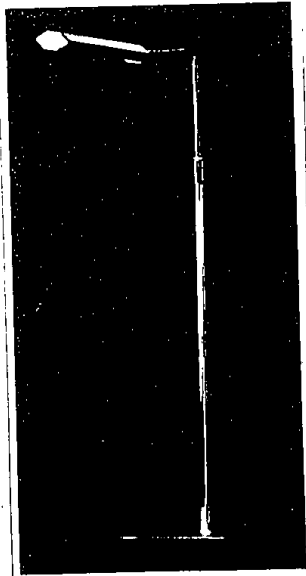
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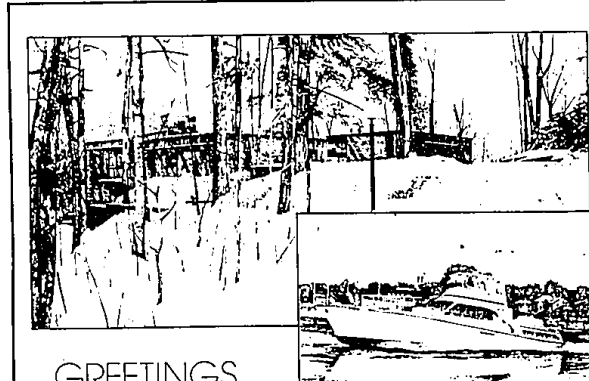
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