

“Federation Corner” column

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Radon problems in many of our public schools

By Paula Bienenfeld

Civic Federation Public Utilities Chair and Parents’ Coalition member Louis Wilen has uncovered a report on radon in our Montgomery County Public Schools. Radon is linked to cancer according to the EPA, specifically lung cancer and leukemia. The report, provided by MCPS officials, is so far limited to a poorly photocopied list of the school facilities and the radon level for each school. We have no additional information.

Twenty-six schools and the Smith Center posted levels in the dangerous zone, with a level of 4 picoCuries/liter (pCi/L) or above. At least one room at the Smith Center had an unbelievably high level of 11.9 pCi/L. According to the EPA, at a level of 10 pCi/L “the risk of cancer from radon exposure compares to 20 times the risk of dying in a fire” for those who don’t smoke. At a level of 4 pCi/L the risk compares to “the risk of dying in a car crash.” Don’t let your child take that risk. Act now and demand independent testing. Better yet, do the testing yourself. Kits are inexpensive and the test is simple and can be done during normal school operations. If not, contact the EPA at 202-343-9290 and let them know what’s going on.

Herewith the list of schools and MCPS properties with dangerous levels of radon. These are:

- Beall Elementary School: 4 rooms where levels range from 4.4 – 7.7 pCi/L
- Cresthaven Elementary School: “All rooms below radon limit except copy room, which had a level of 4.9.”
- Damascus Elementary School: all rooms below radon limit except for the kitchen, gym, and AOR, which tested between 5.5 and 6.2.
- East Silver Spring Elementary School, which tested below radon limit except for the “Ed Suite” which tested 4.7.
- Fallsmead Elementary School is listed as ‘26/42 [rooms] below radon limit. However, no information on the 16 rooms that may fall in the dangerous radon levels is provided.
- Glen Haven Elementary School, “All rooms below radon limit except 7A (4.9). In the case of Glen Haven, the rooms were tested before 2004, that is, over 10 years ago. Retesting is ‘scheduled’ but no dates for retesting are shown on the list.
- Highland Elementary School: All rooms below radon limit except the Gym (4.1).
- Highland View Elementary School: IMC (5) and staff lounge (4.7)
- Jackson Road Elementary School: Room 6 tested at 5.1 and Room 235 tested at 5.4.
- Jones Lane Elementary School: Rooms 3, 12, and 27 tested at 4.0-6.7
- Maryvale Elementary School: Room 1 and the Music Room had high results, 4.6-4.9
- Oak View Elementary School: Room 9: test level 4.4
- Oakland Terrace Elementary School: K1, K2 and IMC levels: 4.2 – 5.2
- Parkland Middle School has not been tested since 2007, almost 10 years ago.
- Quince Orchard High School: Seminar Room at 5.4
- Redland Middle School: 13 rooms tested at 4.7 – 6.0

- Ridgeview Middle School: Rooms 112 and 113 tested at 4.2 and 5.8 respectively.
- Rock View Elementary school was last tested in 1999.
- Rocking Horse: the Basement has high levels, at 5.9
- Lois P. Rockwell: the Conference room had a level of 4.7
- Rosemont Elementary School: The Music room had a level of 6.0
- Smith Center: 5 rooms had levels at 4.2-11.9
- South Lake Elementary School: 9 rooms with high levels ranging from 4.5 – 9.6
- Springbrook High School: 8 rooms with levels from 4.1-9.8
- Takoma Park Elementary School appears never to have been tested.
- Viers Mill Elementary School: Conference Room test level at 4.1
- Watkins Mill Elementary School: Rooms 14 and 20, test levels at 4.5 and 5.1
- Wayside Elementary School: Room 47 tested at 6.1
- Westbrook Elementary School: Main office test level at 4.3
- Westland Middle School: The main gym, the auxiliary gym, and C hall had high levels, ranging from 4.2 – 6.0

The Surgeon General stated in 2005 that “Indoor radon gas is the second-leading cause of lung cancer in the United States and breathing it over prolonged periods can present a significant health risk to families all over the country.”

And, the County Council has recognized the dangers of radon by passing the recent radon inspection law. The elected Board of Education has chosen to ignore the dangers and continues to work to expose children to radon.

If your child is in one of the public schools with dangerous radon levels, take action. Call the State and call the EPA. Demand independent tests and the inexpensive solutions that are required.