

# Demolition method is drawing controversy

**Some residents ask the City Council not to approve a controversial plan to dispose of part of an asbestos contaminated apartment complex on the east side.**

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FORT WORTH — The city is about to jump back into a controversy over how best to demolish asbestos-contaminated buildings.

On Dec. 12, the city and federal government plan to demolish a building in Woodhaven by an experimental procedure that has not been used in a residential area or studied to determine whether it could harm nearby residents.

The procedure is a revised version of the "Fort Worth method" or "wet method" of asbestos demolition, which does not require materials containing asbestos to be removed before the structure is torn down. The wet method is therefore much cheaper than traditional removal.

When the city wanted to use the method in 2004 to demolish the Cowtown Inn, public health officials said the demolition would release particles of asbestos into the air. The federal Environmental Protection Agency says asbestos fibers, if inhaled, can increase the long-term risk of serious health problems such as lung cancer.

Eventually the federal Environmental Protection Agency, which at the time was considering amending federal law to include the wet method as an accepted asbestos removal procedure, abandoned the proposal. The city demolished the building the standard way in 2005.

Now federal regulators say they have improved the method and want to try it at the Oak Hollow apartment complex on the east side. They plan to use the wet method on its office building, which is about 2,200 square feet, and traditional demolition on the rest of the complex.

Woodhaven residents, including Joe Epps, chairman of Woodhaven Community Development, said they had received plenty of notice and support removing the apartments, including the wet-method trial. But other residents and local officials protested the plan at Tuesday's City Council meeting.

State Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth, questioned why the city has used only east-side locations, such as the Cowtown Inn and Oak Hollow, for the asbestos tests.

"It's a predominantly minority community, and it's doing it on the cheap, and it's putting people at risk," he said.

Scott Frost, a Dallas lawyer

who specializes in asbestos cases and is affiliated with Trial Lawyers for Public Justice, said the EPA and the city have tried to play down the risks.

"Even very minute exposures to asbestos can cause cancer, period," he said.

Frost helped fight the plans to use the wet method to demolish the Cowtown Inn. He is suing St. Louis over similar "wet demolitions" near Lambert Airport.

City Environmental Director Brian Boerner said the wet method is safe. And if proven effective, he said, the wet method could make it easier for cities to rehabilitate old buildings with asbestos, which is a major obstacle in many inner-city neighborhoods.

Fort Worth has "dozens, if not hundreds" of such buildings, Boerner said. "Then you think about Dallas, Austin, Houston."

Fort Worth has been trying to demolish Oak Hollow for years. The city sued the owners of Oak Hollow and other apartments over violations of city codes and later bought the complexes with an eye toward demolishing them to make way for redevelopment.

The City Council has approved about \$1.5 million to demolish the apartments.

Boerner stressed that the EPA is leading the wet-method demolition. Fort Worth officials, who originally proposed using the wet method to speed the demolition of asbestos-containing buildings, haven't been involved in the testing since 2005.

The EPA has tested the method twice within the past two years on an isolated parcel that was part of the Fort Chaffee Army reserve base in Fort Smith, Ark. The agency has not conducted a health risk assessment of the alternative method, nor does it plan to, said Adele Cardenas Malott, a program manger in the EPA's regional office in Dallas who's working on the alternative method proposal.

The guideline the agency must meet, she said, is no visible asbestos in the air. That angers some environmentalists, residents and asbestos abatement experts.

"It's stupefying," said John Walke, clean-air director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group that had opposed the Fort Worth method. "It's just incredible how wrong and unthinking they are to continue to inflict the same method on the same residents."

Federal regulators say they are taking steps to ensure that the test is safe. They will set up an extensive network of air monitors around the site and erect a scaffolding wall, covered in plastic tarp, to try to keep materials from escaping the site,



## The concern

Leaving asbestos-laden material in the building during demolition creates the possibility of asbestos fibers wafting into the air and, depending on wind direction and speed, traveling far from the site. That could expose many people to asbestos — a fibrous mineral that can scar the lungs and cause cancer.

## Why it's important

If the test in Fort Worth works, it could have national implications. The EPA says it could amend federal regulations governing the demolition of asbestos-contaminated structures to include the alternative procedure. That is why public health officials, asbestos experts and environmentalists nationwide are watching the case closely.

## Previous tests

The EPA has tested the proposed alternative method twice before. The first test, in April 2006, was deemed inconclusive by experts appointed by the agency. They strongly questioned some of the report's statements. In particular, the experts said the conclusions that the amount of asbestos measured in the air was not a health concern hinted at "a research bias or hidden agenda." A second test, conducted in July at Fort Chaffee, is also being reviewed, with a report expected early next year.

## The site

The Oak Hollow apartment complex will be the first test of the alternative method in a residential area. Only a 2,200-square-foot apartment management office building will be demolished using the alternative method. The city will later demolish the rest of the complex using the currently approved federal method.

## What's next

The EPA plans to begin the experiment next week. It's scheduled to wet down the office building with the foam Tuesday, then demolish the building Dec. 12. The federal agency will analyze dozens of air, soil, dust and pavement samples and issue a report by May. The agency will then appoint a panel to peer-review the report and release a final report by the end of 2008.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency

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said Roger Wilmoth, chief of the industrial multimedia branch in the EPA's Office of Research and Development in Cincinnati.

"We're doing everything we could possibly think of," he said. "Obviously, if we thought there was any possibility of exposure of the residents, we would not conduct the tests in an occupied area."

## ASBESTOS DEMOLITION

### The issue

The Environmental Protection Agency is developing an alternative approach to demolishing structures that contain asbestos. The current standard, outlined in the EPA's National Emission Standard for Hazardous Air Pollutants, requires that buildings be sealed in plastic and that specially trained crews in protective suits remove most of the asbestos-contaminated materials by hand before the building is demolished.

### The alternative

The EPA's proposed Alternative Asbestos Control Method would allow crews to leave the asbestos-contaminated materials in the building during demolition. They would have to wet the inside of the structure with a foaming material before, during and after demolition and to remove as much as 3 inches of soil that may have been saturated with foam that contains asbestos. Crews would have to wear respirators and protective gear during the procedure. The alternative is similar to the controversial "Fort Worth method" abandoned by the EPA two years ago. Instead of foam, that method called for wetting the structure with water.