

# Shpack landfill, 26 years later



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MIKE GEORGE / THE SUN CHRONICLE

█ survivor Mary Soper of Norton, who lives near the Shpack landfill, believes she became ill because of the contami-

nates in the landfill, which sits on the Norton-Attleboro line. Cleanup of the site is scheduled to get under way this month.

# In shadow of Shpack

For neighbors,  
legacy of toxic  
waste a concern

BY REBECCA KEISTER  
SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

**M**ary Soper, who grew up in the shadow of the Shpack landfill, says the legacy and continuing fight for money to clean up the toxic dump is always a thought, a concern and a reminder of the dangers of public unawareness.

▼  
**'This is supposed to be a public health issue.'**

Mary Soper, Shpack neighbor

▲  
But for Ana Mahoney, who now is Soper's neighbor on [redacted] about 2 miles from the former landfill, Shpack is a new word.

"I'm hoping this is far enough away," Mahoney said. "I have a big problem with that, and I don't even think people are aware of such things."

Soper and others who have been engaged in a hands-on fight to have Shpack cleaned up, say they are not surprised that many residents who have recently moved into the area might not be aware of the site's notorious history.

NORTON

Soper is a [redacted] survivor who lived on Maple Street about a half-mile away from Shpack, which, steeped in radiological and chemical wastes, has been on the federal Superfund List for two decades.

But for Ana Mahoney, who now is Soper's neighbor on [redacted] about 2 miles



KEITH NORDSTROM / THE SUN CHRONICLE

Aerial view shows the former Shpack dump, center, on the Attleboro-Norton line.

## Cleanup faces obstacles

► Superfund site has lengthy history, uncertain future

BY SUSAN LAHOUD  
SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

Ronald Reagan was in the White House, Larry Bird was propelling the Celtics to their last NBA championship and the Great Woods Center for the Performing Arts was about to open to critical acclaim in Mansfield.

That's how long the Shpack landfill has languished in bureaucratic limbo since it was added to a federal list of the nation's most hazardous waste sites.

**DETAILS** on how the cleanup will get under way; also, a timeline of Shpack. **PAGE A8**

That's about to change, but there are still plenty of roadblocks ahead.

The landfill on the Norton-Attleboro line was assigned to the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund List 20 years ago in June, but it had already gained a notorious distinction six years earlier.

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Bureaucratic changes, internecine squabbles among agencies, inadequate staffing and funding, along with Shpack's low ranking on the EPA's priority list because it wasn't considered an imminent health threat all have contributed to delays.

Because of its low priority, Paula Fitzsimmons, EPA's former project manager for Shpack, told a gathering in 1990: "You have to look at how long it took to get that way. If it took 40 years to create, it won't be cleaned up overnight."

It was in 2000, after work was held up again on the site's assessment, that former Norton Selectman William Gouveia said: "I'm going to have two things written on my tombstone — I never saw the Red Sox win the World Series and I never saw the Shpack landfill cleaned up."

The Sox, of course, won the series in 2004 — after 86 years — and Gouveia has since amended his earlier lament.

"That's one down and probably 40 years to go on Shpack. But I've made it this far, so maybe there's a chance," he said. "I've lived to see one; maybe I'll live to see the other."

The turning point, spurred by the intervention of U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Newton, whose district includes Norton, came in 2004, when the EPA agreed to a \$43 million plan for a total cleanup of Shpack that included the removal of about 35,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and sediment.

#### Less expensive

The agency had favored a less expensive option that included partial removal of contaminants and capping the rest.

The intent of the town and the more expensive plan is to restore the Shpack site to land suitable for passive recreation.

The agreement in 2004 calls for wetlands to be restored or replicated and clean fill to be used to bring excavation of the site up to grade.

Water lines will be extended to two homes adjacent to the site that currently have private wells.

Institutional controls are to be put in place to restrict future use of the property and groundwater.

Excavation work started in the summer will continue until May or June, at which time, if there is no funding, the project will be shut down until May or June of 2007, said Tim Beauchemin, the Corps' project manager for the Shpack site.

"We have asked for \$3 million for fiscal year '07 and \$17 million for fiscal year '08," he said.

Beauchemin said it is not unusual in these types of projects to find more contaminants than anticipated.

"These types of contaminants are hard to find with bore holes. You really have to dig," he said.

Complicating the project is the timing, limited availability of funds and the competition with other cleanup projects across the country.

The Corps has proceeded quickly, once it got to work, Beauchemin said, but he acknowledges the length of time it has taken to get the cleanup on track is "up there."

No one has to tell that to Selectmen Chairman Bob Kimball or anyone else in town who has had any involvement in the project.

Kimball's involvement started when the town acquired

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Paula Fitzsimmons, EPA,  
in 1990



the Shpack property in the 1980s in the vain hope that would speed up the project.

"Things pretty much dragged along after that," he said.

The project picked up speed when Frank intervened "and got all of the parties in the same room," he said. "It picked up momentum."

News that additional contaminants have been found has added another layer of frustration, but Kimball said it really came as no surprise.

"We're not optimistic that we're going to be able to continue the cleanup process without having to take a break for a year," Kimball said.

But, he believes that will not be the end of the project and that the government will, indeed, finish what it has started.

"It's been a long road and lots of people involved and more meetings than I can count," he said. "It's taken a long time for us to get here."

"We just want to see the damn thing done."

Activist Heather Graf, who has spent years on a committee representing local interests in the project, echoes some of Kimball's sentiments.

"It's been very painful and very frustrating," she said.

"When you consider how long it's already gone on, and the number of agencies that have come and gone ... Any time there's a stop, it makes me crazy," she said. "And I guess I'll be going crazy again."

Still, Graf said the fact that some excavation has already taken place and that contaminants finally will be moving off-site this month is "some kind of progress."

"They're actually going to take something out of there," she said.

## Background on Shpack dump

**THE SHPACK DUMP** is an 8-acre abandoned domestic and industrial landfill that operated from 1946 to 1965 on Union Road in Norton and Peckham Street in Attleboro.

**THE DUMP** consists of land formerly owned by Lea and Isadore Shpack which is now owned by the town of Norton and land formerly owned by Albert Dumont and now owned by Attleboro Landfill Inc. Most of the dump is located in Norton.

**IN 1986**, the site was listed on the National Priority List and the EPA signed an administrative order by consent in September 1990 with a group of parties including a number of local companies such as Texas Instruments to perform remedial investigation and a feasibility study. The initial phase of investigation has been completed.

**THE CONTAMINANTS** that have been of primary concern include radioactive compounds, volatile organic compounds and heavy metals. The volatile organic compounds most often detected are dichloroethene and trichloroethene. Some of the heavy metals that have been found at the site include zinc, copper, chromium, nickel, iron and manganese.

**THE PRINCIPAL RADIOACTIVE** compounds are radium and uranium. An investigation by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission determined that the former M & C Nuclear, Inc. of Attleboro (now Texas Instruments), disposed of trash and other materials, including zirconium ashes, associated with nuclear fuel operations conducted from 1957 to 1965 at the Shpack site.

**THE GENERAL PLATE DIVISION** of M & C began to fabricate enriched uranium foils at this facility in 1952. In 1959, they merged with TI which continued operations at the site using enriched and natural uranium for the fabrication of nuclear fuel for the U.S. Navy and commercial customers from 1959-1981. Fabrication and associated activities were conducted on the Attleboro site under contract to the Atomic Energy Commission and later, under NRC license.

# No more delays at Shpack site

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## EDITORIAL

In 2002, former Norton Selectman William Gouveia said: "I'm going to have two things written on my tombstone — I never saw the Red Sox win the World Series, and I never saw the Shpack landfill cleaned up."

Well, miracles of miracles, the Red Sox did win the World Series. But you can't blame Gouveia, neighbors of the landfill and the entire town of Norton for being frustrated by the lack of success in getting the radioactive dump cleaned up nearly three decades after it was first identified.

In short, the cleanup — which is scheduled to begin this month but faces another year's delay due to lack of funding — has been an embarrassment to all government agencies involved.

Back in 1978, John Sullivan, a young [redacted] resident with a penchant for science, took a Geiger counter to the property owned by Mrs. Isadore Shpack after hearing that radioactive wastes had been dumped at the property.

The Geiger counter proved him correct. An investigation was launched, and a host of local, state and federal officials concluded that radioactive and chemical wastes were buried there.

Metals & Controls, a predecessor to Attleboro manufacturer Texas Instruments, was believed to have disposed of uranium there in the 1950s and '60s. Much of that radioactive waste is believed to come from Metals & Controls' contracts with the federal Atomic Energy Commission.

Local jewelry factories were identified as having dumped chemicals from their manufacturing processes. A former Norton selectman said that the property was a common dumping site for many businesses and individuals during the 1960s.

The federal government purchased the property, which by then had been sold to another family, and fenced it off in 1981. Test drillings indicated that, because of the nature of the wastes, nearby wells or groundwater were not threatened.

More tests were needed, the government experts said, and plenty of money was needed to pay for the cleanup. The Shpack site was placed on the federal government's Superfund list where it would receive funding for the cleanup.

For nearly a quarter of a century, that's been the status quo for the Shpack site. There have been various attempts to get sufficient funding, to find a spot to dispose of the wastes and to conduct studies to see what effect moving the wastes will have.

Congressman Barney Frank, in particular, has shown a determined effort to get the project moving. However, radioactive materials remain underground, a constant threat to the Chartley neighborhood, as the work remains bogged down in the federal bureaucracy.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 cubic yards of radioactive contaminants packed into 10-ton bags is tentatively scheduled to be trucked out of the eight-acre site starting Feb. 16.

It will be the first time since 1980 that contaminants have been excavated and removed off the site, which is marking its 20th year on the Superfund site list this June. Ironically, June will also likely be when the project is shut down — officials estimate for about a year — until additional funding is obtained.

Neighbors have every right to be outraged. Since the wastes were first found:

- ▶ The United States has been through five presidents.

- ▶ Massachusetts has been through six governors.

- ▶ The U.S. was friendly with Iraq as it battled terrorism in Iran.

- ▶ Communism fell.

- ▶ Computers and cell phones became a part of our daily life.

- ▶ Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson and the Olson twins were all born.

- ▶ The Patriots played in five Super Bowls, winning three.

We urge local and state officials to join Congressman Frank in pushing to make sure the delays at Shpack do not last longer than a year. This cleanup is overdue by at least a decade, threatening the health of a neighborhood.

The Red Sox winning the World Series may have taken a miracle, but this project should not. It takes only the federal government's determination to get it done.

And that way, William Gouveia's tombstone won't contain two legacies of failure.