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## No health risk at Katy Field, federal officials say

■ n But many parents remain skeptical about the conclusions from federal and state officials.

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Journal Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN -- In clear terms and with a forthright manner, officials from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry looked concerned parents straight in the eye last night and told them that their children were not at risk from exposure to chemicals by playing at Katy Field.

"There is overwhelming evidence that these levels are safe," Carole Hossom, an environmental health specialist with the agency, said of its latest analysis.

"All the evidence said that no one is likely to have health effects."

That statement -- with the same confidence behind it -- was repeated by officials from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Environmental Management, Naval Station Newport and naval contractors.

All officials also agreed that Katy Field, a 5 1/2-acre park at the northeast portion of Coaster's Harbor Island in Newport, should remain fenced in and closed to the public until the results of further studies can guide its future use.

Meeting with nearly 100 people in a packed council chamber in Town Hall, the conclusions of the experts were met with considerable skepticism from some parents.

Those parents noted that the EPA strongly criticized the Navy just a few months ago for its failure to act quickly to EPA concerns about the repeated exposure of children at the field.

Katy Field is the burial ground of the Navy's former Fire Fighting Training Area and is a federal Superfund site.

The Navy closed Katy Field and a youth center on the grounds in October as political pressure and public concern increased over the Navy's continued use of a playground, park and ballfield at the site.

"I'm not comfortable. Nothing's going to make me comfortable about this," said Sara Gallagher, of Tiverton, who said she lost her job at the Navy-run youth center when it was closed down.

Gallagher also said that her 8-year-old daughter, Brittany, who

played daily at the site during the summer, suffered from repeated migraine headaches and nausea, conditions that ceased within two weeks after she stopped playing there.

The parents' concern prompted U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, who hosted the meeting, to ask EPA Superfund branch chief Don Berger "why the EPA jumped down the Navy's throat" in the first place.

"We don't use dead bodies" as a criteria for action, Berger replied. "We use theoretical risk and we raised a caution flag."

Hossom said that the tests of 37 new soil samples taken at locations all over Katy Field in November reinforced what was known from four previous studies: that Katy Field is safe for recreational use. Berger agreed.

To put in perspective for parents the low levels of metals, hydrocarbons and other toxic substances found at the field, Hossom said that children would be safe even if they continually ate handfuls of dirt from the field for a year.

An earlier ATSDR study found that the amount of lead present at one of the surface test sites was almost 20 times greater than the state's minimum acceptable level for public health.

Officials last night declared that reading an anomaly, a deviation possibly caused by something as undramatic as a chip of paint.

"How can they say she won't be affected down the road?" asked Charles Gallagher, Brittany's father. "They didn't give us any reassurance, as far as I'm concerned."

ATSDR's family health physician, Dr. Robert Johnson, replied: "We can never say 100 percent."

Johnson and Hossom briefly explained the way that the agency weighed many factors in determining risk. But their comments weren't specific enough for a few parents, who asked for a follow-up meeting.

Officials agreed that another meeting was necessary, and they promised to keep the public informed until every question was answered.

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