

## **THE BIG READ: Investigation finds disturbing contamination at ex-GM site slated for housing**

As much as 1,100 times above healthy limits in a subterranean swamp of chemicals and heavy metals

Ed Smith, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter, Dec 27, 2024 4:39 PM

The former General Motors site on Ontario Street in St. Catharines slated for homes contained toxic chemicals at alarming levels, detected just two years before a developer purchased the former heavy-industrial property.

Despite efforts to find out what the condition of the site is, residents concerned about the potential presence of hazardous industrial waste where a new luxury development was planned with much fanfare from City Hall and former mayor Walter Sendzik—who aggressively pushed the project and led the effort to rezone the lands in 2020 from industrial to residential use, while failing to reveal the chemical hazards—have been kept in the dark.

Until now.

A two-year freedom of information investigation by The Pointer resulted in the release of the documents this week, after City officials and GM fought to keep them from the public.

A subterranean swamp of chemicals and heavy metals was present next to homes, businesses and a major waterway in the heart of the city.

The documents shared with The Pointer this week include Phase I and II environmental assessments commissioned by General Motors, completed in 2010 and 2012 respectively. These in-depth studies found the soil and groundwater beneath the site harboured nearly 25 different potentially harmful chemicals at levels above Ministry thresholds meaning they could be harmful to the environment and human health.

It is a long list of cancer-causing chemicals, heavy metals, petroleum hydrocarbons (PHC) and other industrial wastes that have shown to be incredibly harmful to humans, fish and aquatic life at high concentrations. Lead contamination—which can hamper brain development in fetuses, infants and children, was found at 10 times the level set to protect human health and the environment; PHC F1 (a class of petroleum hydrocarbons that includes things like gasoline) was present at levels more than 20 times healthy limits; trichloroethylene (TCE), a known human carcinogen, at more than 30 times healthy limits; benzene, another known carcinogen, at levels more than 50 times set limits; polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), more than 85 times set limits; and PHC F3 (another class of PHCs which includes diesel) at a shocking 1,100 times the set standards.

Other harmful carcinogens like arsenic, cadmium, cobalt, antimony, chromium, molybdenum, nickel, ethylbenzene, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)—a particularly toxic type of PHC that is incredibly hard to break down in natural conditions—were all discovered at the site above Ministry thresholds set in the Environmental Protection Act to protect people and wildlife.

Chemicals and metals like barium, zinc, copper, silver and toluene, were also found at levels exceeding healthy standards. While these are not known carcinogens, they can cause negative effects to the liver, kidneys and lungs of humans and wildlife at high exposures.

As part of the Phase 1 ESA in 2010, fieldworkers frequently encountered soil that had “a noticeable hydrocarbon odour and sheen”.

The studies divided the 22-hectare site into three sections, the East and West Plant, and the sloped area that leads down to Twelve Mile Creek. This sloped area has been a known dumping ground for the site dating back to when it was a foundry pre-1950. Many contaminants were found in this location, raising serious concerns about the implications for Twelve Mile Creek, where groundwater from the site is known to flow.

For decades, local residents concerned about the potential hazards had little recourse but to rely on assurances from officials.

Sendzik had questionable ties to the man behind the development plan, who had previously been convicted on extortion charges. Provincial authorities responsible for the environmental health of communities issued statements based on superficial testing in 2019 and 2021, claiming the presence of chemicals, according to their cursory evaluation, did not pose a threat to human health, despite the presence of highly toxic compounds such as PCBs, which were widely banned prior to the '80s due to the severe risk of cancer associated with the dangerous man-made chemical. Neither the City of St. Catharines, or the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks responded when asked for the date they first received these assessments.

Despite the dated nature of these two reports, and the lack of any in-depth study of the site conducted since, these assessments remain the most up to date picture of the contamination on the site. Years may have passed since the fieldwork was conducted, but studies suggest many of these harmful chemicals and heavy metals do not break down on their own and remain present, even multiplying in the ground and water for decades.

### **Studies suggest many of these harmful chemicals and heavy metals do not break down on their own and remain present**

“Metals, such as lead, mercury, and arsenic, are always persistent, since they are basic elements and cannot be further broken down and destroyed in the environment,” literature from Toxic-Free Future states.

For example, PCBs, which were already confirmed to be leaking from the site before a temporary stormwater system was set up to catch them, are persistent, meaning they are not easily broken down by natural processes or exposure to sunlight and are bio accumulative, meaning they build up in human and animal tissue during repeated exposures.

“Once exposure levels are sufficient to cause adverse effects in humans, domestic animals, or wildlife, their impacts are not easily reversed,” Toxic-Free Future states. “Then, even if their production and use are discontinued, many years may pass before their concentrations have sufficiently declined so that they no longer pose risks.”

Now, the just released documents, based on two previously unreleased environmental assessments by GM show the risks were much deeper and far more dangerous than what the public previously knew.

On December 17th, the City of St. Catharines was finally forced to comply with an order from Ontario's Information and Privacy Commission (IPC) to release the Phase I and II Environmental Site Assessments done by GM for the site when it was shuttered and while the auto giant was looking for a buyer interested in the property where heavy industrial operations took place for almost a century.

As previously reported by The Pointer, the City of St. Catharines and General Motors have fought for two and a half years to keep the documents from being made public. City officials argued citizens would not be able to understand the documents and therefore would likely misrepresent them. It was also claimed that releasing the information would damage GM's corporate image.

The Phase I document was completed in April 2010 and coincided with the closure of the Ontario Street plant, while the Phase II report was finished in October 2012. Together, they contain more than 700 pages detailing the toxic chemicals and heavy metals present on the property at the time of the testing, highlighting areas of "environmental impairment associated with the site."

The 2010 analysis identified 12 areas of environmental concern, including the 2.8 acre sloped area leading down to Twelve Mile Creek; the presence of numerous underground tanks used for storing a wide variety of toxic chemicals; the tangled web of underground pits, trenches and sumps used to store and move petroleum products and industrial solvents; and areas used for draining soiled scrap metal.

"It has been very upsetting for me to watch how hard the City has fought to keep people from seeing these contamination documents," John Pula, the former health and safety representative for the Canadian Auto Workers union at the Ontario Street GM plant, told The Pointer. For 20 years he fought to eliminate workplace exposures to chemicals including asbestos, PCB's, metalworking fluids and pesticides to protect his fellow employees from the cancers they are known to cause. Now in retirement, he and his wife maintain their home only blocks from the Ontario Street site. "When the plant was in operation I was always concerned for the health of the workers and now that the plant has been demolished, I am just as concerned for the health of my community. These chemicals are nasty stuff. We fought everyday to minimize exposure for the workers, we have to continue to fight for the same thing for the community."

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It remains unclear at what point the City of St. Catharines obtained these studies and realized the extent of the contamination at the site.

As part of their arguments to the IPC for not releasing the studies, officials at the City of St. Catharines made it known they have had them since at least 2010. At some point during that year, the Ministry of the Environment demanded the reports, and the City complied. According to the IPC submission from the municipality's lawyer, they received the reports as part of a grant application. Bayshore, the company that purchased the site in 2014, submitted an application for grant funding as early as 2016.

It's unknown if the City received these damning reports at that time. The City did not respond when asked about the date of receipt.

It's unknown, but seems likely, the City had these documents in their possession when, in November 2020, former mayor Walter Sendzik pushed to have the land rezoned for residential/mixed use.

As reported by The Pointer, Sendzik's ties to the proposed developers of the GM site date back to 2014–2015. During his 2014 campaign, Sendzik openly boasted about meeting with the developer to discuss a way forward for the property. In 2015, he was photographed on a private fishing expedition in the Caribbean with Robert Megna, the owner of Bayshore. Sendzik later described the encounter as coincidental and claimed to have reimbursed Megna in full for his share of the expenses upon returning to Canada.

Further investigations by The Pointer uncovered private lobbying efforts ahead of the 2020 rezoning and apparent agreements made by Sendzik, which led developers to believe there was a "100%" probability that the land's use would be rezoned for residential purposes.

In June 2020, Aaron Collina, the president of Movengo, the company that provided financing for Bayshore to purchase the property and took over as proponent when the developer bowed out, emailed Sendzik and Brian York, the City's head of economic development, summarizing a meeting the trio previously had.

Collina wrote, according to his account, the City would "pressure" the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority to acquire the sloped property leading down to Twelve Mile Creek. It's not known whether Sendzik or other City officials had seen the Phase I and II assessment which detailed the significant contamination on this portion of the site and the risks it could pose.

He also wrote the City would take over responsibility "regarding enviro risk to city in exchange for a res mixed use land use."

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According to his email, the three also talked about having council approve taxpayer subsidies for the developer in the form of Community Improvement Plan grants.

Taxpayer-funded incentives were aggressively pushed by Collina.

"By end of summer, CIP will be in front issue," he wrote. "It's political. It would be useful to lobby to show how important the program is to maximize benefits to attract a development."

Collina lobbied to the City again in November of 2020, urging officials to rezone the land at an imminent council meeting where a decision was set to be made. He wrote that his planning firm "has done a thorough investigation of the site and surrounding area. They have submitted, on our behalf, comments to you today in support of staff's recommendations on the re-designation of the GM lands."

There was no mention of PCBs that were leaking from the property, or the stew of other toxic chemicals present on the site.

Council, led by Sendzik, approved the zoning re-designation on November 30, 2020, clearing the way for residential development on the former industrial site. In a City press release Sendzik heralded the decision “will help drive our collective return to prosperity”.

It’s a bold statement when it remains to be seen whether residential development can ever proceed on the site. As of December 2022, a Record of Site Condition, a detailed analysis of the land and its current state, had yet to be completed and submitted to the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP). At that time, MECP officials and consultants with Movengo, appeared before council to address concerns from the public and the fact that PCBs were known to be leaking from the property, potentially impacting Twelve Mile Creek.

During the December 5 Council meeting Ministry of Environment Niagara District Manager Kim Groombridge provided City Council with an update of the ministry's monitoring.

“Our role here is to ensure that the owner of the property retains a qualified person to develop and carry out a work plan to address the concern that has been identified, which is the discharge of PCB contamination from the property into storm sewers, off of the property,” she told council.

It remains unclear why there was no mention of any other contaminants on the site, despite the MECP obtaining the Phase I and II assessments in 2020. The MECP was aware of the dangerous levels of numerous carcinogenic chemicals on the site and the threat that they could also be leaching into the soil and groundwater off site—similar (sic) to the PCBs which were discovered in nearby municipal storm sewers. “As far as water motor monitoring goes... we did find PCBs in the municipal storm sewer that were above levels that are acceptable, and we've been working with the company and their consultants to ensure that they get a work plan to make improvements to that and ultimately stop that discharge,” Groombridge told Council in 2022, noting these levels were “significantly” above provincial water quality standards.

As early as 2019, the Province was warning the City of the PCB risks.

“The ministry has requested a work plan with time frames from the property owner to address elevated PCB concentrations discharging from the property to the municipal storm sewer on the east side of the property,” an April 2021 report from MECP to the City highlighted.

It’s unclear why these reports, post 2020 and MECP receipt of the Phase I and II assessments, did not include mention of the presence of other cancer-causing chemicals on the site at levels well above acceptable thresholds and why the public was never notified.

Movengo did not respond to questions from The Pointer about work that has been carried out on the site to date. It’s unknown if further studies have been conducted since the last Phase II assessment in 2012. The rezoning to residential/mixed use would suggest a more stringent analysis is required. The 2012 study notes it was completed under the assumption “the current and future land use is to remain as commercial/industrial”.

The Phase II analysis makes it clear that the level of contamination requires further study.

“Further characterization of this area may help determine whether the chemicals of concern present are causing, or could cause, an adverse effect to offsite receptors, most notably, Twelve Mile Creek.”

And while the picture painted in these reports is quite troubling, it’s noted it isn’t the true scale of just how much contamination exists on the site. The Phase II analysis explains the results are only for those locations where boreholes and monitoring wells were installed. This includes 25 boreholes and 16 monitoring wells in the East Plant area; along with 26 boreholes in the West Plant and nine monitoring wells. It’s enough to cover a wide surface area, but not a true picture of the 22 hectare site.

“Subsurface conditions between boreholes, monitoring wells and sampling locations have been inferred and may vary significantly from conditions encountered at those locations,” the report states.

“First, it is crucial to understand that any reports more than 2-3 years old would be considered outdated,” explains Dean Fitzgerald, a senior ecologist with Integrated Ecosystem Solutions. “This doesn’t mean that the chemicals have disappeared, but rather that they can migrate over time. The topic of migration of the chemicals is a big source of uncertainty, as parameters can move via water, dust, even leaves from growing on trees or bushes on site can become contaminated and then blow into neighbouring yards. Without further studies, it’s impossible to know the current situation.”

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