

The Little Town that Could

—Victor residents work with DEC to fight pollution



By Dr. Joan Kennedy

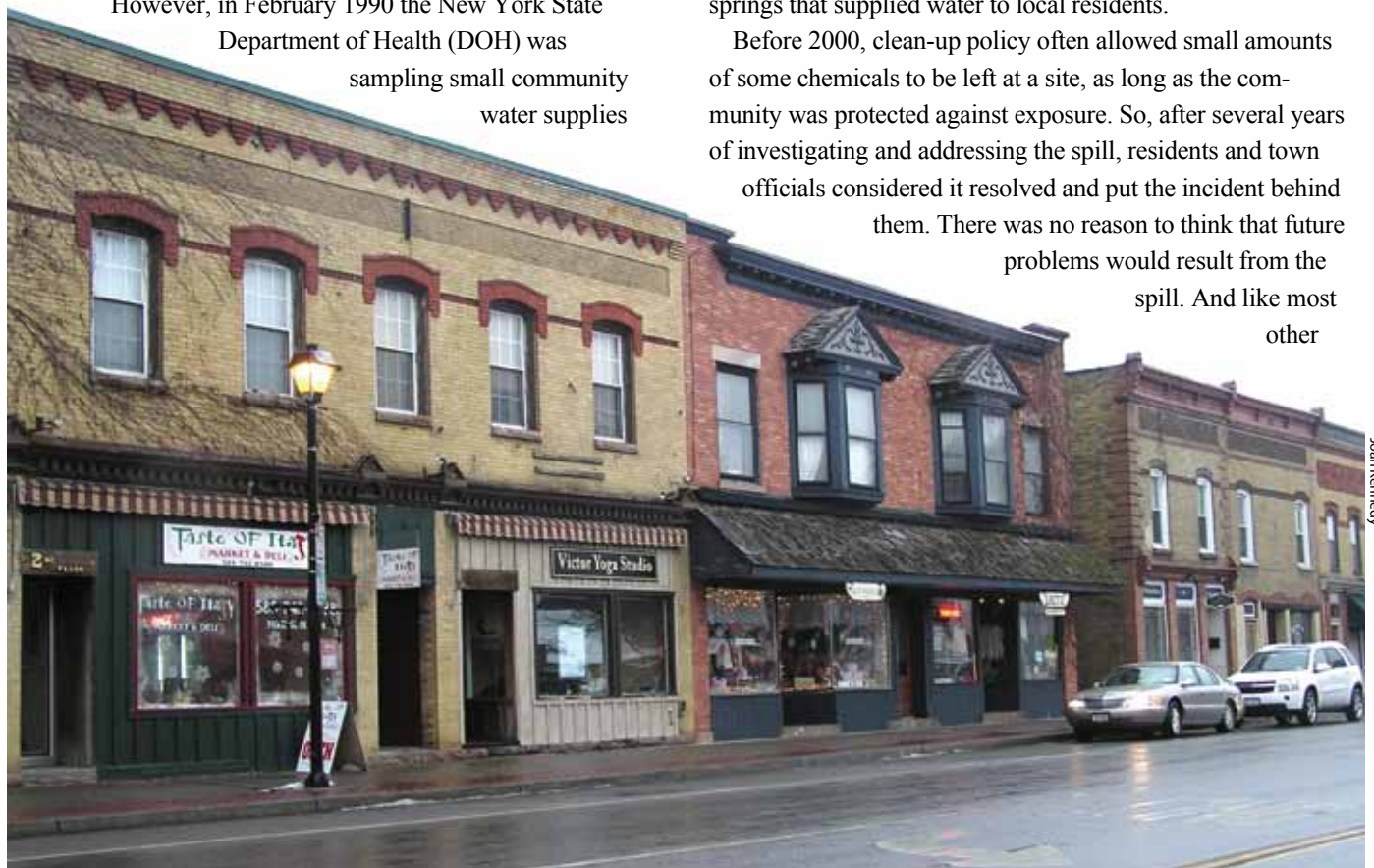
Victor, NY is a small, picturesque community nestled in the gentle, rolling hills of northwest Ontario County. The town's 12,500 residents enjoy the charm of small-town living while being committed to the ongoing revitalization of their downtown business district. Most residents believe Victor is a great place to live, work, visit and do business.

Mike Annechino is one of those people. Down-to-earth and hard-working, Mike moved his family to an upscale Victor neighborhood in November 2004. To Mike, Victor appeared the perfect little town in which to live and raise his family. Indeed, there was no apparent reason to suggest otherwise.

However, in February 1990 the New York State Department of Health (DOH) was sampling small community water supplies

across New York State and discovered chemical contamination in the Modock Road Springs, one of Victor's drinking water sources. This was a surprise since contamination had not been found in earlier sampling. Working closely with DEC and the Village of Victor, DOH moved to protect the health of the residents. Alternative water supplies were provided to potentially affected homes, and DEC continued to search for the source of the contamination. By the late 1990s, DEC determined that in the 1960s or 1970s, chemicals were spilled or dumped at a nearby gravel pit and over time drained into the ground. Eventually these chemicals reached the water table and the springs that supplied water to local residents.

Before 2000, clean-up policy often allowed small amounts of some chemicals to be left at a site, as long as the community was protected against exposure. So, after several years of investigating and addressing the spill, residents and town officials considered it resolved and put the incident behind them. There was no reason to think that future problems would result from the spill. And like most other



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communities in a similar situation, the town didn't have guidelines in place for determining whether and how to approve residential construction on land where this type of chemical contamination is likely to have existed. It was not uncommon for residential tracts like Mike's neighborhood to be established on land that was originally thought to be affected, and was now considered cleaned up. In fact, safe reuse is an important goal of remediation.

However, in 2000, during an investigation of previously contaminated sites in Denver, Colorado, scientists discovered that even after a site was cleaned up and the water was safe, lingering fumes from some chemical spills could rise up through the soil and enter enclosed areas such as the basements of people's homes. This discovery was referred to as "vapor intrusion," and led the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state environmental agencies like DEC to re-examine their environmental clean-up policies to consider the possible occurrence of vapor intrusion.

DEC moved quickly and changed their clean-up programs to include tests for vapor intrusion. In the process, DEC revisited more than 400 sites previously considered "cleaned up," including the Modock Road Springs/DLS Sand and Gravel, Inc. site in the town of Victor. So in early 2007, Victor residents received a letter indicating that DEC would be taking a closer look at the old site to see if vapor intrusion was a problem.

The letter drew immediate concern from many residents, especially given that they had been previously assured that the site had been cleaned up and they were safe. And as far as the best scientific knowledge of the 1990s showed, those beliefs were true.

For Mike, the letter came as a complete surprise. He remembers, "I



read the letter and saw that my house was definitely inside the area described as 'affected.' After I read the letter, I turned to my wife and told her, 'This is unbelievable.'" He continued, "I found out my family was at risk by an informational letter in the mailbox. The person who sold me my house never mentioned anything about water contamination and no one mentioned it in my neighborhood when I bought my house."

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Within days the local media had the story. The headline spilled across the front of the Sunday newspaper in bold type: "DANGER BELOW." The story described that dangerous chemical fumes left over from the old spill may be seeping into Victor homes located near the gravel pit. The following Monday, DEC offices were inundated with calls from concerned residents.

In response to the community's reaction, the town quickly held a public meeting to address concerns, answer

questions, and share information. Both DEC and DOH staff attended. Local residents packed the small town hall on a warm, spring evening, anxious for answers.

At the meeting, DEC explained vapor intrusion and the new technology that brought it to light in the Colorado investigation. Staff told worried residents that New York State was moving quickly to take a new look for any possible

vapor intrusion at previously cleaned-up sites across the state. The details, however, did little to quiet the rumors and concerns that were running rampant throughout the community. How could they embrace DEC's explanations now, after being given similar assurances years earlier? Moreover, the answers did not solve the more immediate concern: Were they presently safe in their homes?

The town board sprang into action to restore the community's confidence and address concerns. Working closely with

a panel of representatives from DEC and DOH, the town of Victor formed a voluntary citizen committee and approached Mike Annechino to head it. He had inspired trust from his neighbors during the public meeting as he asked the hard questions, and insisted on clear, accurate answers and information. At first Mike refused, but after thinking of his family's and community's well-being, he accepted.

The first goal of the committee was to ensure community residents' safety and respond to their fears. DEC tested 73 homes and installed six vapor removal systems (similar to radon removal systems) where testing showed vapor intrusion was a concern. District Senator Michael Nozzolio helped other homeowners in the study area who worried that they were at risk by obtaining funds to provide additional basement ventilation systems.

Mike Annechino then helped steer the citizen committee to develop a central location where people could get accurate information that explained the situation in an easy-to-understand way. This really helped to address homeowners' concerns and dispel rumors. He also kept abreast of emerging concerns



Excavating a test trench in the central part of the mine to try and locate the source of contamination.

and would sometimes go door-to-door to talk with neighbors, homeowners and business owners. Mike and the committee also encouraged monthly meetings between the Victor Town Board and DEC and DOH. In addition, the Victor town supervisor routinely posted updated articles and meeting notes on the town's website.

Next, working closely with DEC and DOH, the committee met regularly to conduct public information meetings in an open forum. DEC answered residents' questions, updated the community on the results of investigations, and shared information on upcoming technical work. Most importantly, the written communication for

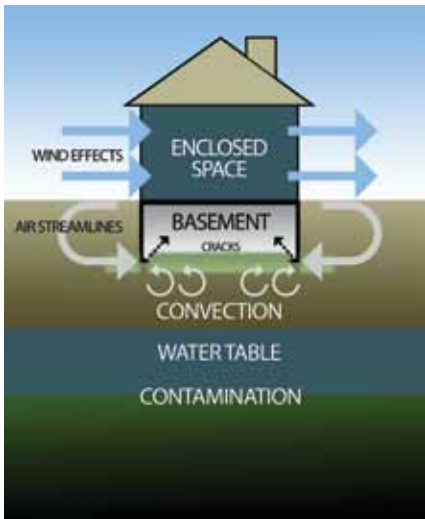


Diagram of vapor intrusion.



DEC contractor drilling a hole in the basement floor to determine if a depressurization system (used to alleviate vapor intrusion) is properly working.



Workers sample the soil and install a groundwater monitoring well near Modock Road Springs.

public meetings was put together collaboratively, Mike remembers. “We worked together on our information and messages.”

The committee met with DEC to build PowerPoint presentations and offer ways to present information to the public in a way that was easy to understand. Mike laughs as he recalls, “For example, we

told them that only engineers and scientists use terms like ‘operable unit’ and ‘permeable reactive barriers.’”

As the process evolved, residents saw that the citizen committee represented their interests and was a resource for providing answers to difficult questions. They also saw that DEC was responding directly to their

most important concerns, and residents found that they were, in fact, safe in their homes. The approach worked. “DEC was perceived by the community as really helping!” says Mike.

Jason Pelton, DEC’s project manager responsible for day-to-day operations during the cleanup in the community, agrees. He enjoyed the friendly greetings by residents as he stopped to buy coffee on his way to work. Mike thinks Jason’s willingness to talk to residents and answer questions is one reason why the Victor community has continued to enjoy prosperity and growth, including a fast growing subdivision in Mike’s neighborhood. During the effort, Jason felt like he was part of the community and now looks forward to opportunities to work with other communities in a similar way.

You won’t hear it from Mike Annechino, but in many people’s eyes, he was a big part of why this community pulled together and collaborated with DEC to ensure the health, safety and welfare of its residents. Looking back, Mike thinks out loud, “The key to the long-term success of the Victor community addressing this problem was the sense of partnership that developed as everybody worked together.” Mike believes this cooperative approach is one DEC can build on, and that it could serve well as a model for similar environmental investigations in the future.

An avid cyclist, **Dr. Joan Kennedy** is a citizen participation specialist in DEC’s Albany headquarters.



Drillers retrieve soil samples from an area north of the sand and gravel pit prior to installation of a groundwater monitoring well.