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More than two decades after her first husband was fatally shot, Leona Leben determined she would face a jury after a three-day preliminary hearing that ended July 1. Raisch waivered her right to a speedy trial at Friday's hearing.

Larry Raisch is charged with first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the death of her first husband, David Leben. Leben testified at the hearing.

Judge sets Raisch trial for April

Larry Raisch is charged with first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the death of her first husband, David Leben. Leben testified at the hearing.

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Residents tackle life near hazardous site

BY STEPHANIE CHEN
Special to The Olathe News

At the heart of Olathe lies the courthouse, City Hall, Fire and Police departments, county offices and a 1 1/2-acre property oozing with hazardous chemicals.

This EPA Superfund site and "ugly blight" as some nearby residents call it, is polluted with dangerous chemicals in the soil. For decades it has been a top concern for surrounding homeowners.

The former chemical broker- age and recycling company Chemical Commodities, Inc. failed to properly transport and dispose hazardous waste from 1951 to 1989. The company's negligence has caused a string of problems that persist to this day.

Living next to the hot spot for more than 50 years, Loula Park saw CCT's recklessness during the company's operation. "I'm just sick of it," Park said. "I have put up with it for so long. It's just been going on forever."

In what seems like an eternal battle for these residences, many have given up hope for hazard-free yards. Some have unsuccessfully tried to sell their homes, while others adapted to living with special ventilation systems in their homes and footing the extra electric bill costs out of their own pocket.

Residents learned to remove the contaminated soil and fill it with fresh soil to grow grass. Installing a fence to prevent the contaminated soil from seeping into their homes is just another precaution that many neighbors have taken.

Even after the Environmental Protection Agency announces a final cleanup solution, expected to be made in late September, these residents still will be liv-
Cleanup, real estate prices just two of residents’ worries

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neighbors want the concentration brought down to 60 parts per million.

Trotter lives in the closest home to the site. Her worries extend beyond moving the cleanup process forward. She will have to deal with the digging and noise when the EPA begins.

Trotter knew about CCI when she bought her home in 1998. She said she thought the site was already cleaned up, but she noticed grass would not grow on the south side of her home.

Then a plumber came to her home one day and notified her of the unusual smell underground.

So Trotter bought new dirt and grass.

She didn’t plant vegetables or fruit in her yard.

She tried to avoid looking at the site, but it’s hard when you live right next door, she said.

“I don’t want to remember that the dumb thing is there every day,” she said.

She said she once believed in achieving a solution by attending the advisory meetings, but the only outcome for Trotter has been frustration that nothing more can be done.

“Trotter’s house was in an area that was cut off,” said a neighbor.

“The REAL ESTATE FACTOR

The first change came with a vapor system installed in her bedroom.

When grass refused to grow because of the oil clumps in her soil, she spent hundreds of dollars on new soil and grass.

Her daughter rarely comes over because of the fumes.

“She complains about feeling sick for a couple of hours after she eats,” Trotter said. “I don’t care of like it should have been.”

Explosions and fires were ordinary, Park said. She said the explosions most likely were a result of improper storage.

She remembers green snow one winter because of the chemicals. At one point, she said, the water was green with floating lumps of rust and random patches of grass and limbs left from the ice storm more than three years ago.

Debris covers the property, which she has tried to clean up on her own.

“It’s an ugly lot, and to see that day after day, year after year, and knowing that it is contaminated is very distressing,” she said.

A resident since 1957, Divine saw the companies before it was shut down, the demolition of the building and the barren and littered lot it has become.

Like Park, she recalls the fires. Divine said she once was evacuated from her home during the 1970s. The most surprising factor of these proliferating chemicals is the location in which it took place, she remembers.

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JAY SOLDNER/THE OLATHE NEWS

Nellie Cutter displayed a crack in the living room wall that she deduces is from various shifts in the foundation of her house because of the poor soil quality of the land under her home at 316 S. Keeler, directly west of the former site of Chemical Commodity, Inc.
The plan was approved in June, the agency is taking public suggestions until Sept. 15 to create a plan assessing the needs of both sides.

The outlined plan will excite and dispose of the contaminated soil. This process takes only a few months.

Peterson said the real challenge will be treating the groundwater, which could take more than 30 years.

There are also fumes from the chemicals underground that residents say they have to live with daily. The EPA and Boeing have paid for the installation and management of vapor extraction systems in homes to dilute the nauseating chemical odors. About 29 homes have or will need the filtering system, said CCI, the leader of the residents' advisory group, a team of neighbors lobbying for a cleanup solution.

The EPA's plan doesn't come cheap.

After spending millions of dollars on demolishing the site and on preliminary work, the plan will cost the federal agency an additional $8 million.

IT'S JUST NOT ENOUGH

Resident Janet Trotter said she feels the EPA's proposal is not disposing of an adequate amount of dirt to eliminate the contamination. The EPA's cleanup plan calls for reducing the amount of hazardous chemicals like TCE to 1,000 parts per million. This would reduce the chemicals in half, Trotter said.

"So what good is that?" Trotter asked. "We want it brought down further.

She said she and many

directly west of the former site of Chemical Commodities, Inc.

The first change came with a system installed in her bedroom.

When grass refused to grow because of the oil clumps in her soil, she spent hundreds of dollars on new soil and grass.

Her daughter rarely comes over because of the fumes.

"She complained about feeling sick for a couple of hours after she visits," Culter said. "I don't know if it's because of the chemicals or not, but it never happened when she goes anywhere else.

"Now Culter is concerned about the cracks in her walls. She said she is sure it is a result of the chemicals in the groundwater."

Culter said she should be reimbursed for the extra costs by the companies involved and the EPA.

But the EPA tests reveal the opposite of many resident complaints. Substance explained that the contamination levels are not high enough to prevent grass growth. She supported her theory with laboratory testing on the area, which concludes the site is not dangerous.

Despite the EPA's assertions, Culter still points out that her home will not sell.

"If it weren't dangerous, then why won't my house sell?" she asked.

FiRE, EXPLOSIONS AND GREEN SNOW

Park views selling her home pointless. She knows no one will buy her home knowing about the hazards.

Nestled in her house since 1962, she calls it home. But, she said, she would never have bought the house if she knew about the company's illegal actions.

Park endured the mess from the very beginning, and she said it saddens her to see many paying for the irresponsibility of one company.

When CCI was in business, Park said, she always was suspicious that the company was not handling its hazardous substances properly.

She noticed the awful smell during the 1980s. She sent her complaints to the city, but the city did little and ignored most of the problem.

They (the city) laid it on her, she said. "It wasn't taken care of like it should have been.

Explosions and fires were ordinary, Park said. She said the explosions most likely were a result of improper storage.

She remembers green snow one winter because of the chemicals. At one point, she said, the water was green and floating lumps of rust and chemical discharge. The cement on her curbside was constructed to keep the groundwater from contaminating her property.

In the midst of the mess, Park said she appreciates the efforts of the EPA. Although the outcome may never be perfect, she said, she is glad measures are being taken.

"We just don't want to be labeled a CI area," she said.

NOT A PRETTY SIGHT

Across the street from the Divine residence is the Superfund site.

Today owner Jeanne Divine looks through her front door and sees a fence with a mass of overgrown trees and shrubs.

"It's pretty disturbing," she said.

A resident since 1957, Divine saw the company before it was shut down, the demolition of the building and the barren lot it has become. Like Park, she recalls the fires. Divine said she once was evacuated from her home during the 1970s. The most surprising factor of these polluting chemicals is the location in which it took place, she said.

"Olathe is a beautiful town, and we have something here that never should have happened," she said.

As one of the oldest residents in the area, Divine knows the end is nowhere near. She does thank the EPA, the advisory group and the city for their efforts in cleaning up. Early this week, city officials announced they would help maintain the fenced area around the site. The area is dirty and covered in overgrown plants.

Although cleaning this federal site is not the city's responsibility, spokesman Alice Snider said the city wants to do everything it can to help the situation.

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