

Suit filed against GHS renovators

By GAIL MCCARTHY
Times staff

Three former Gloucester High School staff members and four former students filed a lawsuit yesterday against three companies involved in the \$30 million high school renovation project.

The claims charge negligence and seek money damages for the severe illnesses suffered by staff and students caused by their exposure to hazardous chemical fumes, dust and other airborne irritants during the renovation, said local attorney Joseph M. Orlando.

The plaintiffs are Christina Ciarametaro, a biology teacher, Therese Milton, a former computer operator and secretary, Vicki Pinksten, an assistant teacher, and former students Kelly Clark, Josephine Margiotta, Amber Palazola and Jason Rowe.

The defendants are architect Drummery Roseane Anderson Inc. of Newton, TLT Construction Corp. of Wakefield and Martin Surfacing of Hunt Valley, Md.

The lawsuit, filed in Superior Court, says the plaintiffs developed a variety of debilitating conditions during the construction that began in 1994, including the onset or aggravation of asthma so severe that regular use of steroid inhalers was prescribed.

"Defendants knew or should have known that hazardous chemical fumes, dust and other airborne irritants from the renovation were present in occupied areas of the high school, and defendants were negligent in failing to take steps to prevent or minimize the harm caused to plaintiffs," according to the suit.

The suit further states that the companies gave no information or warning regarding the presence of, or danger presented by, the hazardous fumes and airborne irritants.

These substances migrated into occupied areas of the high school, the suit charges. Students and staff complained of a variety of symptoms, including skin rashes, nausea, fatigue and difficulty breathing, the suit states.

Even after these complaints, the defendants claimed there was no danger to building occupants, the suit says.

Air testing results demonstrated

Spending seems to have no end

By DAVID JOYNER
Times staff

What began in 1994 as a three-year plan to renovate Gloucester High School now seems to mirror a 1986 Tom Hanks/Shelley Long movie about a couple fixing up a house.

It was titled, "The Money Pit."

The City Council voted Tuesday to spend another \$1.5 million for the high school's makeover, bringing the project's total to about \$30 million.

Nearly five years after ground was broken, work is still incomplete and the cost has swelled by nearly 20 percent.

The renovation has been anything but a slapstick misadventure, however, leading to health concerns for teachers and students, and to legal action.

City officials have been cryptic about possible lawsuits, but this week Mayor Bruce Tobey promised the council "very aggressive litigation," in which the city will seek "substantial damages."

He declined to give specifics in public.

"We can discuss it in executive session or people can watch as the trial unfolds," he told councilors. "This will not be an empty exercise."

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the presence in the high school of substances, such as isocyanates, at dangerously high levels.

Some staff and students became so ill that they were advised to stay out of the high school or limit their time there. Several students were forced to enroll in a day-long tutoring program at an elementary school.

In early 1997, Gloucester High School was closed down while spe-

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cialists worked to detoxify the gym of the isocyanates that caused allergic reactions with some students and teachers.

The lawsuit says Martin Surfacing used products in the installation of the track and gymnasium floor containing isophrone diisocyanate. This substance is a member of the chemical family known as isocyanates, which are classified as hazardous substances in Massachusetts and are associated with the development of asthma, bronchitis, hypersensitivity pneumonitis and long-term loss of lung function.

Individuals who are exposed to isocyanates may become sensitized, which poses a risk that the person will experience severe attacks of asthma triggered by subsequent exposure to even low levels of isocyanates.

The defendants "should have known the dangers associated with exposure to isocyanates," the lawsuit said. "... By negligently applying the isocyanate-based products, Martin Surfacing increased the risk that Gloucester High School occupants would be exposed to isocyanate fumes."

The lawsuit cites a previous project by TLT Construction at Suffolk County Courthouse in Boston where products containing isocyanates were used. Many employees complained of upper respiratory and central nervous system conditions, which they related to exposure to isocyanates.

In 1995, more than 20 courthouse employees sued TLT and others for injuries alleged to have been suffered as a result of exposure to isocyanates emanating from the project.

"Despite this prior experience, TLT allowed the use of isocyanate-containing products on the renovation and failed to properly supervise Martin Surfacing in its application of products containing isocyanates," the suit states.

It was later discovered that a failure by TLT to maintain negative pressure in the construction areas allowed dust to migrate into occupied areas of the high school.

Orlando & Associates of Gloucester is working with the Boston law office of Hutchins Wheeler & Dittmar. Orlando said they seek a jury trial on the matter and expect an answer from the defendants to the complaints within the next month.

Representatives of the three companies could not be reached for comment.