Overview: The EPA's School Siting Guidelines

The guidelines can help schools avoid a physically and financially demanding process of site cleanup or relocation.

I. What are they?

The School Siting Guidelines were developed by the EPA as *voluntary* guidelines to help communities and school boards choose better sites when building **new** schools. It is important to recognize that these are not federal regulations. However, EPA's School Siting Guidelines recommend that the states initiate new policies that incorporate safe school siting and that local school districts seek to avoid locations that have onsite contamination or are in very close proximity to pollution sources if acceptable alternatives exist within the neighborhoods being served by the school.

II. Key Elements

- **Meaningful Public Involvement:** Involving the stakeholders in the community, especially those directly impacted at the very beginning and throughout the school siting process is essential. Stakeholders include parents, teachers, school personnel and nearby residents. EPA provides details on how to initiate and maintain this involvement throughout the school siting process.
- **Environmental Review Process:** EPA provides a detailed 6 step process that describes how to evaluate candidate sites to ensure that environmental and health safety is considered. Public involvement is crucial to the success of the review process.
- **Evaluating Impacts of Nearby Sources of Pollution:** EPA identifies sources of air pollution that can directly contaminate the ambient air or be transferred to the soil at candidate school sites and provides a process for evaluating the public health and environmental impact posed by these nearby sources of pollution. These sources include cars, trucks, trains, etc., stationary major sources (factories, power plants, etc.), and local sources (auto body shops, dry cleaners) etc.
- **Siting Criteria Considerations:** EPA includes screening criteria that identifies desirable attributes of a site (no unacceptable environmental,

public health risks, presence of sidewalks and bikeways, etc.), environmental, public health and safety hazards impacting a candidate site (proximity to contaminated sites, the presence of contamination such as PCBs and lead in existing buildings, etc.), and factors that influence exposures and potential risks (nearby air pollution sources, evidence of contaminated soil, etc.). These criteria can be used to guide the selection of candidate sites for schools.

- **Cleanup and Remedial Actions:** If the selected site contains on-site and/or off-site contamination, the EPA guidelines require that a site specific cleanup plan and a long-term monitoring plan be developed, reviewed by the public, and implemented. EPA provides some guidance on how to develop both of these plans. The recommendations for States and Tribes is a section which identifies important steps that states and tribal governments can take to enhance the capacity of local communities to identify candidate school locations.

III. Why are these Guidelines Important?

There are few laws that restrict siting schools on contaminated sites or near sources of pollution. Twenty states have no policies of any kind affecting the siting of schools in relation to environmental hazards or the cleanup of contaminated sites. Only 5 states prohibit or severely restrict siting a new school on or near hazardous or toxic waste sites.

Children spend nearly one third of their typical day in the school environment. A harmful school environment can hinder the learning process and mental development. It can also lead to a decrease in overall health and can, with prolonged contact, cause disease or illness. A supportive and healthy environment is an integral part of the education process.

The guidelines can help schools avoid a physically and financially demanding process of site cleanup or relocation. Many school districts have made this mistake. Consider the Belmont Learning Complex in Los Angeles, CA. This school was built on top of a former oil field full of explosive and toxic gases and other contaminants. Parents raised concern in the early months of construction, and an environmental assessment was performed. Soon after, construction was stopped and the cleanup began. The total cost of the cleanup was $310 million and construction took an extra year before completion. There's also the Alvarez High School in Providence, RI that was built on top of a former silver manufacturing site; two schools in New Bedford, MA that were built on top of a former ash dump; and the Cesar Chavez High School in Houston, TX that was built on top of a former refinery; this site was also ranked in the top 1 percentile of schools impacted by air pollution according to a USA Today study published in 2008. These siting guidelines can prevent disasters such as these in your community.

IV. How can you get a copy?

The School Siting Guidelines are available on the EPA's website for public viewing & download. **http://www.epa.gov/schools/siting/**

You can also obtain a hard copy of the document by calling the EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection at **(202) 564-2188** or by sending a letter of request to:

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