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Mercury fears rising

By ANNABEL SCAIFE

A GROUP of Mt Eden residents fear mercury poisoning if a contaminated government property up for sale is excavated for development.

The Auckland City Council and Auckland Regional Council are assessing resource consent applications made by Environmental Scientific Research (ESR) for removal of contaminated soil at its Kelly St site.

The property, valued at \$1.1 million, cannot be sold until the crown research institute has carried out thorough reme-

diation. Engineers commissioned by ESR estimate 1700 cubic metres of surface contamination by mercury and lead.

The Mt Eden North Residents Association wants the Eden/Albert Community Board to urgently investigate the consents to ensure proper measures are being taken.

Susan Bretherton, of the association, says the consents should be made notifiable because of the high level of concern among residents.

Deputy chairman Paul Harrop attempted to reassure about 20 residents at the meeting that the board would form a small committee to ensure due processes are taking place and "nothing is afoot".

The residents association lobbied the Auckland City Council last year to buy the ESR property and turn it into a reserve before a

developer bought it, but its campaign has made no headway.

A development company with a proposal to build 23 apartments has a conditional contract with ESR to buy the 4500 square metre section. The council is considering the developer's second application for resource consent.

Association spokeswoman Rachel Power says residents are in the dark about the contaminated site.

"There have been no assurances made to surrounding residents on any of the matters," says Ms Power. "There are four asthmatics living in Grayson Lane and even that doesn't make an iota of difference."

Epsom MP Richard Worth says that as a crown entity, ESR has the obligation to make sure the site is safe before it's sold.

ESR does not know how the site became contaminated, but be-

lieves mercury found in the soil relates to its former use as a dental training clinic.

"ESR wishes to dispose of the site in a responsible manner, ensuring it is remediated to a standard commensurate with all appropriate international standards," it says in a written statement.

Ms Power believes the institute is eager to excavate the site, rather than cap it, so the developer can go ahead with plans for basement car parks.

"We feel the whole contamination issue is being used deliberately so that the developer can provide underground car parking. Should they [ESR] be excavating for the needs of the developer? Is this tax-funded garages? No other options have been canvassed at all." ESR says it will not replace the contaminated soil with clean fill because of the developer's plans. It proposes to remove 1700

cubic metres of earth, and the developer plans to remove a further 2900 cubic metres.

"The actual magnitude of earthworks for this development means our health and well being are put at risk," says Ms Power.

Soil and Health Association director Dr Meriel Watts says excavation work at the site could result in airborne particles containing mercury and lead.

Dr Watts says special care would need to be taken to prevent particles blowing about.

The best ground remediation would be to plant crops that naturally extract the chemicals. However, this would take a long time, and if work went ahead, contractors may need to put up screens to contain dust.

The Auckland Regional Council is awaiting information from ESR before it can begin processing its remediation resource consent.