

8 • PINELLAS • SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2003 • THE TAMPA TRIBUNE • TBO.com Keyword: Pinellas

LOST LANDFILLS

Continued From Page 1

cation of effort. But if we had a problem site, we'd jump on it."

Still, Pinellas is cooperating with the DEP's request.

To compile an inventory, the county is drawing data from a range of sources including aerial photographs, which date to the 1920s, and the recollections of longtime and former employees.

No Records

The lack of comprehensive records in Pinellas and most other counties means many past dumping grounds usually aren't found or scrutinized until plans are proposed to reuse them — and potential environmental or construction problems surface.

State and local regulations do not prohibit construction atop or near former landfills, even though they can compress over time, produce potentially explosive methane gas as garbage decomposes, or cause soil or groundwater contamination.

The practice is discouraged, however.

The state says old landfills are better suited for recreational uses, such as ball fields, hiking trails or golf courses.

Two years ago, concerns about landfill-related construction prob-

lems kept the city of Clearwater and the Philadelphia Phillies from building a spring training stadium on land where a dump operated in the 1950s and 1960s.

St. Petersburg College donated the 32 acres of athletic fields to the city, but the Phillies ultimately rejected the site and decided to build the stadium elsewhere.

The old landfill is at the northwest corner of Drew Street and Old Coachman Road, near a neighborhood with a history of sinkhole problems. The city recently began monitoring the land for known toxins and so far has found no problems, said Terry Finch, Clearwater's environmental programs coordinator.

Although it's rare for a property owner in unincorporated Pinellas to propose building atop or adjacent to a former dump, a map of such sites would prove useful, said Paul Cassel, the county's development review services director.

"Personally, I think it would be good to know where all those sites are," he said. "If we were to get a site plan, we would know if there are some issues there. It'd save the property owner and us a lot of time if we knew that up front."

Cassel could recall only one case, in 1996, in which the county denied the owner of property in unincorporated Pinellas a zoning change that would have allowed him to put mobile homes on a former construction landfill.

The 10-acre site, at 62nd Avenue and 55th Street N., ultimately became

"Personally, I think it would be good to know where all those sites are. If we were to get a site plan, we would know if there are some issues there. It'd save the property owner and us a lot of time if we knew that up front."

PAUL CASSEL

Development review services director, on the need to update the records of all the old dump sites that we in use before 1975

a park after it was annexed by the city of Pinellas Park.

The lack of open space available in nearly built-out Pinellas illustrates how difficult it can be to avoid such sites.

In October, county officials considered acquiring a 17.6-acre former dump in the High Point area, near St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport, for sorely needed community recreation.

But the county decided not to pursue the acquisition after a staff analysis indicated the land would require costly remediation before it could be used, said Rudy Garcia, division engineer of parks and structures for Pinellas public works.

"Even if you did soccer fields or some sort of open recreation, you need parking and restrooms," Garcia said.

"You need to deal with the methane. And I don't think on this one it would have been a cheap endeavor at all."

"In a county like this, when you see some green space you've got to be suspicious already," he added.

"There's just not a lot of land left

The dumps of yesteryear offer a kind of environmental folk history in Pinellas.

They often were nothing more than a convenient hollow where trash was indiscriminately discarded. They faced none of the environmental safeguards now required, including liners and systems designed to collect water and gases that filter through decomposing debris.

"The scary part about it is a lot of stuff went in there without the liner system," said Warren Smith, the county's solid waste director and a former environmental regulator in Hillsborough County during the 1970s.

"We as a society didn't know that these things were harmful," Smith said. "We didn't know the oils that were used in electrical transformers were carcinogens. So what did they do with the old transformers? They put them in the landfill."

Many old dumps in Pinellas likely accepted construction or demolition debris, rather than garbage, Stowers said. So any potential problems likely would deal more with soil instability, rather than pollution, he said.

Still, Stowers was unable to say whether anyone living on or adjacent to an old landfill should be concerned.

"I'm not a good enough scientist to tell you that," he said. "I don't know the answer to that."

Reporter Carlos Moncada can be reached at (727) 823-3412.