



Westinghouse site ready to be reclaimed

Westside plant once plagued by PCB contamination now listed as 'shovel-ready' for redevelopment

By Bill Strother

A conflict-fraught saga that began more than half a century ago in Bloomington is finally coming full circle with the marketing of 69 acres of vacant industrial ground on the city's west side.

The land at 300 N. Curry Pike is the site of the former Westinghouse plant, the source of PCB contamination that put Monroe County on the map as one of the most chemically contaminated counties in the nation, a designation that plagued Bloomington for decades and which it only in recent years has begun to shed.

CLEANUP A LONG PROCESS

The plant site is now owned by the Swedish/Swiss conglomerate ABB, with the plant itself demolished in 2006 as part of an EPA cleanup directive. The years-long cleanup of the site, during which 40,000 tons of contaminated soil and concrete were removed, wrapped up only in 2009. Since that time, the federal Environmental Protection Agency

has been working to certify it as no longer a hazardous waste site.

That certification is expected within weeks, according to real estate broker Dave Harstad with Summit Realty, the company that's listing the property for ABB. The Swiss company bought the operation from Westinghouse successor CBS, which kept full responsibility for the cleanup there and at several other local sites. Westinghouse and then CBS have

spent hundreds of millions of dollars cleaning up the mess left 40 years ago.

JOBS STILL TO BE FINISHED

Some mess remains, with Lemon Lane Landfill, once a city-owned landfill, now permanently capped and visible from Ind. 37 as a gray, tarp-covered mound off the east side of the highway. Just to the south, a permanent water treatment plant removes PCBs from an underground spring that passes through the landfill. The plant is just north of West Third Street at Patterson Drive, hidden by trees and undergrowth. Water from the spring eventually finds its way to Clear Creek.

Another large dump, Neal's Landfill on Ind. 48 west of Bloomington, is capped, but remains heavily contaminated, with work continuing there to permanently remediate drainage from the site. Several streams, a scrap yard and a city sewer plant, so heavily contaminated by sewer drainage from the plant that it was closed, also have been cleaned and thousands of truckloads of PCB-contaminated waste and soil have been hauled to EPA-approved hazardous waste disposal sites. And at least one other site, Bennett's Quarry north of Ind. 46, has a quarry drain to trap PCBs.

PCBs

The Curry Pike plant began operations in 1957, producing Westinghouse industrial capacitors — among them the cylindrical containers atop many utility poles — for distribution around the world. An oily chemical with high heat tolerance, polychlorinated biphenols, were manufactured by Monsanto Chemical Co. and were used to insulate the units, proving highly effective in fire prevention and increased safety.

But in the late 1960s the chemical, identified commonly as PCBs, began to be suspected of causing health problems, and Monsanto quit manufacturing it except for limited use — one of them as insulation fluid for capacitors — in

Westinghouse site



1970. Congress finally banned it in 1979, and PCBs were identified as a significant hazard to human health. The Westinghouse plant had not only manufactured the PCB-laden capacitors, but thousands of worn out capacitors were brought back to the plant here and made their way into local landfills, driveways and backyards, where scrap merchants broke them open, spilling the PCBs onto the ground, in order to get at valuable copper.



A faded sign made almost illegible by the weather announces the address at 300 N. Curry Pike of the site of the former ABB and Westinghouse plant. Bill Strother | Herald-Times

CLEANUP A FIGHT

Contaminated sites in the county and in neighboring Owen County were designated as early Superfund cleanup sites and after years of bickering with Westinghouse on the cleanup, the city, county and other parties, including the EPA, proposed a cleanup plan in the form of a court-supervised consent decree that would have required construction of a trash fired incinerator where contaminated materials would have been burnt.

That plan met with fierce resistance on several grounds, many based on a profound distrust of Westinghouse and its assertions that the incinerator would be safe. The consent decree, which had passed the city council in a meeting that many described as a brawl, with anti-PCB forces storming the chambers, became the focus of a contentious Democratic primary in 1987 that pitted sitting Mayor Tomilea Allison, who'd negotiated the proposed settlement, against longtime party ally Charlotte Zietlow, who opposed the incinerator.

City council members also faced challenges, and although consent decree backers beat back the primary challenge, the plan lost steam and was finally shelved, critics claimed, not because Westinghouse accepted that it was the bad idea that it was, but only because the company had decided it was too costly to engineer an effective way to incinerate such hazardous wastes with city-generated trash.

Since that time, cleanup evolved through the takeover and dissolution of Westinghouse by the television/media/industrial conglomerate CBS; a lengthy staged cleanup of sites here monitored and approved by the EPA; the sale of the plant itself, with contaminated areas sealed off, to ABB for its own industrial uses; and finally ABB's shutdown of the plant and its demolition in 2006.

Now, with final acceptance of the site cleanup any day now, the almost level property, blanketed in fresh green ground cover, with a few fences here and there, is about to hit the market at \$50,000 an acre for an all inclusive offer.

If a developer wants to buy a portion of the site, Harstad said, the per-acre price goes up from there.

NOW 'SHOVEL READY'

The site last week was designated by the state as "shovel ready," one of 13 newly designated locations that join 80 others across the state where companies can move quickly to build, with title and paperwork already in order and with environmental reviews completed or, as in this case, almost completed.

Bloomington Economic Development Corp. President Ron Walker, whose job is to attract new industry and business to greater Bloomington, said he's already shown the site to visitors from South Korea and Germany, and both groups have liked it, with the only caveat the about-to-be delivered EPA clearance.



The Westinghouse site is up for sale, now that it is set for certification as officially cleaned up by the EPA. It has been named by the state as one of 13 newly designated "shovel ready" sites in Indiana, joining 80 others identified since 2006 as ready-to-build industrial sites across the state. Bill Strother | Herald-Times

Walker is eager to get the property back into production. "It used to be a pretty strong employment site," he said. "We want to bring it back to that as a modern manufacturing site."

The site is among the best in this region, he asserted,

with large scale infrastructure — sewers, natural gas and electrical — already accessible from the days of the old plant, and it has rail service and quick access to Ind. 37.

“It’s clearly one of the best pieces — it’s arguably the best piece of industrial land in the Bloomington area,” broker Harstad said. “It’s been developed before and it doesn’t have some of the unknowns as some of the other sites. There’s not a spoonful of dirt out there that hasn’t been tested for contaminants.” And with the state designation, “It truly is a shovel ready site.”

He said the site could go as one large piece or could be subdivided, with interior roads added, providing more

frontage. He suggested extensions of Liberty Drive from the south and Profile Parkway from the west would not only open up the site to many uses, but would create new and more efficient traffic patterns for the entire west side west of Ind. 37.

Given the current economy, Harstad is not looking for a quick sale but believes that when it does sell, he’ll be proud to have played a small part in turning a brownfield location into a viable and valuable business location. “Hopefully, there will be many, many jobs” that come from the old Westinghouse location.

TIMELINE OF WESTINGHOUSE PLANT

1957: Bloomington Westinghouse plant opens at 300 N. Curry Pike, where capacitors containing PCBs as insulating liquid are manufactured.

1957-71: PCBs from plant infiltrate sewer system, thousands of worn out capacitors are dumped in area landfills or are opened to retrieve scrap metals, with PCB contamination spreading.

1977: Westinghouse phases out use of PCBs in its capacitors.

1981: EPA orders Westinghouse to start several cleanups; city of Bloomington sues the company.

1983: Settlement with court monitored consent decree gets preliminary approval in settlement of lawsuit. Decree calls for trash fired incinerator to dispose of PCBs.

1985: City council approves settlement in raucous meeting.

1987: Democratic primary becomes battleground, with anti-incinerator forces challenging the plan and consent decree.

1989: The Bloomington plant is sold to international conglomerate ABB, but with Westinghouse still responsible for PCB cleanup.

1996-98: Westinghouse merges with CBS, with CBS becoming the responsible PCB party.

2006: ABB ceases operation of the Bloomington plant and it is demolished.

2009: Westinghouse site cleanup is complete.

November 2011: Sixty-nine- acre site is declared one of 93 “shovel ready” sites in Indiana and goes on the market, while final EPA clearance is still to come.