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Mercury vapors close Anderson Twp. gym

By Lisa Wakeland



Anderson Township residents pass a basketball in the Beech Acres RecPlex gym during the annual Turkey Shoot. The Park District closed the gym area Dec. 8 because of detectable levels of mercury vapor.

The Beech Acres RecPlex gym is closed until further notice because of a detectable amount of mercury vapor.

Anderson Township Park Commissioners shut down the gym Dec. 8 after testing revealed low levels of mercury vapor, said Park District Executive Director Ken Kushner.

Though the vapor levels are within acceptable ranges, Kushner said they wanted to err on the side of caution and close the RecPlex gym, 6915 Beechmont Ave.

The Anderson Township Park District planned to replace the gym floor this year and put a new floor on top of the current one, which was installed in 1971.

Kushner said one of the companies who bid on the project suggested testing for mercury vapor because many of the gym floors installed between the 1960s and mid-1980s contained small amounts of mercury.

The mercury in the 3-M Tartan Brand polymer flooring was a catalyst used to set the floor when it hardened, explained Greg Stein, a community involvement and health education coordinator for the Ohio Department of Health.

It was standard practice and mercury was likely used in many different items prior to knowledge of its harm, he said.

Mercury is a neurotoxin and vaporizes at room temperature, Stein said. The hotter it is, the more vapors are released.

The Anderson Township Park District worked with Stein to figure out the best solution for replacing the gym floor.

Because this is still a relatively new issue in Ohio, Stein contacted a colleague for advice, who did not recommend putting a new floor over the rubber polymer floor that contains mercury.

"What happens is the floor underneath never stops off-gassing, and the mercury will still come out," Stein said.

Trapping the vapors creates a more concentrated volume and the mercury vapors will find any crack or hole in the top floor to get out, he said.

"It will create a worse problem by increasing the level of (mercury) vapors," Stein said.

Slightly more than 2 micrograms per cubic meter were found in the Beech Acres RecPlex gym and acceptable levels for schools, daycares and similar facilities are 1 to 3 micrograms per cubic meter, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, an organization used by the Ohio Department of Health.

Testing did not find any mercury vapor levels in the halls or the rest of the RecPlex, Kushner said.

"It's an inconvenience to our users, but in the end we'll have a better product," he said.

"We're taking the proper steps and getting not only the proper flooring put back in but we're also being responsive and responsible. Today, it isn't much of an issue, but in 10 years it could be serious."

The Park District is trying to move its programs to other area gymnasiums, but will issue refunds to patrons, Kushner said.

He is not sure when the gym will reopen, but said it could take months to remove the old floor and install the new floor.

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