

Save Our Brisbane Suburbs

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Factsheet #6

Asbestos a health problem ... or not?

At 7am on Wednesday February 20, 2002, a heavy tracked excavator began smashing a house located on the corner of Graham Street and Harts Road Indooroopilly. The site is typical of many in the post-war suburbs ... a large block, large trees, a well tended garden and a house designed in early sixties style ... most probably by one of many post war architects who were developing new forms of housing, arguably the precursors of, if not an actual new style of sub-tropical architecture. Most people know the style ... primarily weatherboard or chamfer board with some brick, large areas of glass, some flat external cladding and a corrugated roof, the latter two, typically of asbestos cement. And therein lies the problem exposed during that Wednesday!

Everybody knows that asbestos is potentially dangerous ... and nobody wants to be exposed to it.

Why then when the first attempts were made to have the demolition done "properly", was it virtually impossible to get anyone interested? The first calls were made to the BCC, EPA, Workplace Health and Safety after hours and/or emergency numbers from 7.30am. At that time, you get call centres! No point in doing more than emphasising the danger by asking them if they would like to live next door ... having breakfast with several young school age children as the dust descends! So what next? Naturally, none of the call centres could commit to anything beyond reporting the message but having been asked for a contact phone number, one could reasonably expect a reply. No replies! The demolition continued! From 7.30 on, many children are dropped on the footpath outside the school opposite ... were they being exposed to dust with asbestos?

By 8.30, still no replies so time to talk to the media. Channel 9 sent a news crew with interesting results. Suddenly as if by magic, the demolishers started hosing the wreckage and were now wearing cloth masks. But still no sign of the "emergency" responses from BCC, EPA or WPH+S. The media seemed pre-occupied with the Governor-General. In the meantime, the dust was building up on the house next door! A phone call to the local BCC councillor's office was transferred to a BCC officer who initially suggested that asbestos was an EPA or WPH+S issue except that it is BCC that issues demolition permission or does it? It turns out that in effect, "nobody" responsible issues the demolition permit, a further product of the reduction in services and responsibilities of local authorities. We were later assured by a BCC officer that all approvals were appropriate! Does that include smashing asbestos and then apparently transporting and dumping it? Is it general waste? Not normally! So how should asbestos be demolished?

Contact was made directly with both the local councillor and the state member of Parliament ... but no further responses there either! So the problem remains and the demolition continues ... next morning! The problem appears to be that the community is aware of the dangers of asbestos and expects the systems put in place eg 24 hour emergency hotlines to the EPA, to actually work. In fact they don't at case study level. So the "eyes and ears" that report such illegal construction and/or demolition are betrayed by those responsible for the emergency responses! And there is the connection with the Governor-General. What is the point of reporting if there is no action?

While the Lord Mayor and the Premier are preaching responsibility for past system failures in the Anglican Church which were reported and allegedly nothing was done, do we have the same problem but with full awareness and systems in place? Will the Premier and Lord Mayor resign?