Fumes Worry those near Old Coal Plant

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Some people living near an old plant that once converted raw coal to coke fuel say they're worried about the dust and noxious fumes coming from demolition work at the site near downtown Indianapolis.

The plant, owned by Citizens Energy Group, was shut down five years ago and workers this summer began tearing down a towering, 6 million-cubic-foot tank once used to hold a flammable gas. The utility says air-quality tests show the fumes pose no health risks, The Indianapolis Star reported Wednesday (http://indy.st/Nibkk2 [1]).

The gas was used in the process of making coke, a hardened fuel formed by baking coal at 1,800 degrees for more than 24 hours. It's used in steel mills and foundries.

Air tests by local health officials last month didn't find anything dangerous, but more sensitive equipment is needed to check the noxious smells coming from the site, said Jeff Larmore, supervisor of hazardous materials at the city's Department of Water Quality and Hazardous Materials Management.

Larmore said methane, ammonia and carbon monoxide could be found in the gas once held in the tank being demolished.

"We just can't say there isn't a hazard there," Larmore said. "If people are smelling something, there's obviously something present."

Tony Owens, 53, said dust from the plant, which dates to 1908, has long worried him. He partially blames his lung problems on living for the past 30 years next to the plant, which is about two miles southeast of downtown Indianapolis.

Owens and his wife say the scrap metal left in piles at the site have for weeks been emitting dust and fumes so intense the couple has suffered debilitating headaches and nausea.

"It's heavy, real heavy to breathe," he said.

Officials of Citizens Energy — which owns Indianapolis' natural gas and water utilities — say that while they understand neighbors' worries, they have done everything they can to keep the fumes down, including power washing the inside of the tank before it was dismantled.

Company spokeswoman Sarah Holsapple said residents have long complained the tank was an eyesore and that the plant needed to be torn down and rehabilitated.

"Citizens is dismantling the holder in the safest, least obtrusive way possible, but

the reality is that this is a demolition project," she said. "We're looking forward to the day when the land can be used to bring economic growth to the neighborhood."

Larmore said neighbors also have valid concerns about what happens next during the demolition — and what toxics might be released.

"Where the actual coke operations take place, the coke batteries, they still haven't touched them yet," Larmore said.

John Havard, the utility's manager of environmental technical programs, said it would be at least another year before work starts on dismantling any other potentially hazardous areas of the plant.

Some residents aren't buying assurances that everything is being done to limit runoff, dust, airborne toxics and foul odors.

"I guarantee this would not be happening in another neighborhood," said Marti LaMar, president of the West and East of Churchman Avenue Neighbors association. "I guarantee it wouldn't be happening this way. But we're poor."

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Information from: The Indianapolis Star, www.indystar.com *[2]*

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