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Dust from demolition of hundreds of KC homes poses health risk

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The Kansas City Star

As an excavator claw tore into the vacant Kansas City house, walls collapsed and dust billowed up and out over the spectators standing across the street.

But this wasn't the same dust that swirls around a baseball infield.

Dust from demolishing homes that range from 50 to 100 years old contains paint made with lead and mercury, as well as other particulates that can trigger respiratory problems.

Kansas City's demolition practices are being called into question now that the city has started two projects that will tear down over several years more than 1,000 pre-1978 homes, mainly on the East Side.

According to state regulations, demolition dust must be kept to a minimum and should not be visible beyond property boundaries.

But news photos and [videos](#) in recent months captured two home demolitions that show clouds of dust blowing into neighborhoods.

In one case in January, in an area being cleared for the new East Patrol police station, an excavator with a huge claw ripped into a home and dust drifted over a few dozen onlookers, including city officials, residents and children.

In another demolition in September, part of the city's effort to begin ridding neighborhoods of the blight of abandoned homes, Mayor Sly James operated the equipment. Dust swelled, choking the mayor and onlookers.

Those two demolitions have prompted very different reactions from city officials.

One who oversees the East Patrol project said last week that the dust from the demolition of two homes near 26th and Olive streets should have been better controlled.

"It wasn't handled properly," said city architect Eric Bosch. "(The subcontractor) did use means and methods that were not correct."

Bosch said that contractors for the patrol station project would begin using new methods that have been developed in the past several years and used in cities such as Chicago, St. Louis and East Baltimore, Md., and in California.

About 60 homes are being torn down in that project.

But another official in charge of the larger 1,000-home project doesn't believe the house the mayor helped with was mishandled, despite the evident dust.

"We try to minimize the dust," said Nathan Pare, manager of the city's dangerous-buildings division. "But as you see, whenever you demolish a building, obviously there are going to be particles in the air. There is no way you can avoid that."

Although Pare said dust is not supposed to leave property lines, sometimes that can't be helped, for example on windy days.

A spokesman for the mayor said that he didn't think James was aware of dust dangers, but that he was aware of the clear dangers of leaving abandoned homes in neighborhoods.

"You have to weigh environmental impacts and also the good of the neighbors and what is good for the long term," said Danny Rotert. "You often have to weigh what are unknown hazards versus very known hazards. I think we do our very best to do that."

However, Amy Roberts, a manager for the lead program at the city's health department, said the department would be monitoring the dust.

"Anything that creates dust is a risk," she said. "9/11 showed us that."

A doctor with Children's Mercy Hospital said she planned to call the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice division.

"There are obvious air quality issues and lead poisoning issues ... and there is the environmental justice issue," said Jennifer Lowry, director of the hospital's pediatric environmental health specialty unit.

Environmental justice is the term for an effort by the federal government to ensure that all people have the same degree of protection from environment and health hazards. In the Kansas City case, most of the houses are being demolished in low-income and minority neighborhoods.

"If it was any other place in the city, it wouldn't be tolerated," Lowry said.

East Baltimore

Over the years, Americans have become much more aware of the crippling health effects of lead poisoning, which include learning disabilities, lowered intelligence and behavioral disorders from even modest exposure.

A seminal study by Johns Hopkins University released in 2003 showed that lead dust levels in the air were 40 times as high during demolition and six times as high when removing debris.

Controlling dust that includes lead became a key element of the [East Baltimore revitalization project](#), which planned to raze about 800 homes on 88 acres over several years.

"We discovered a couple simple but major things that made a difference," said Scot Spencer with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization that played a leading role in the project.

Those included:

- Wetting down buildings before, during and after demolition when the cleanup is being performed. Fire hydrants provide the water, and barriers are set up to stop runoff.
- Limiting access to the sites with cyclone or chain link fence.
- Picking apart the building, removing woodwork and lumber and other materials that can be salvaged. During what is called deconstruction, workers continue to water the site.

The city also employed aggressive public outreach to warn residents to keep windows closed during demolition. Later, residents also were provided with sticky mats for their doorways and special vacuum cleaners to clean up dust that might get tracked into a home.

Air monitoring studies at the demolition sites showed that large amounts of lead-contaminated dust can be controlled using those methods.

"Control of lead dust from housing demolition is feasible and necessary," according to a report.

The Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning estimated that implementing the demolition protocols added less than 25 percent to the cost of a conventional demolition.

"We sort of weigh it against the cost of treating people who suffer from respiratory illness," Spencer said. "Since most of this was done in response to lead, a couple years ago we also estimated treating a child who has suffered from lead poisoning. It is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$700,000."

KC demolitions

Kansas City has a lot of homes built before 1950. They contain poisonous materials such as asbestos, lead paint and mercury.

City officials in September announced that they would begin a demolition project over the next four or five years to knock down 1,000 of those homes that are vacant and considered dangerous.

The decision came on the heels of a use tax passed in August on out-of-state sales that could provide several million dollars a year to get rid of bad houses.

The city since September has demolished about 150 houses.

The first one went down in a cloud of dust while James, sitting in an excavator and wearing a blue hard hat and

orange safety vest, pulled a lever and unleashed the steel claw hovering over the roof of the home at 4406 Brooklyn Ave.

At the same time, a project to build a new \$57 million East Patrol police station at 27th Street and Prospect Avenue was moving into demolition stage. The city had bought more than 120 parcels of land over a four-block area.

The city has required the contractors to follow asbestos-removal laws.

City officials said they are discussing using deconstruction methods not for pollution prevention, but to salvage valuable materials.

In fact, workers began salvage work at a couple of homes at the East Patrol project last week.

“When they are done, there is still a shell, there is still a building that needs to be demolished,” Pare said. “That could be the wave of the future on how demolitions are done.”

Bosch agreed that deconstruction would become common soon because of the cost of putting debris in the landfills.

Besides, by salvaging materials, contractors can save money.

But the focus of deconstruction does not include removing lead paint. City officials are resistant to that because no regulations require it.

“I know it’s an issue,” Pare said. “Ten years from now they may see this is a bad idea.”

It’s important that Kansas City do lead abatement on the 1,000 houses, said Lowry with Children’s Mercy Hospital, because many of them are in [areas](#) that have a large number of high-risk lead paint homes.

“It is still a health issue and the city should address it,” she said. “We have kids with asthma, and when dust flies up, they are going to have more asthma problems. The lead paint (dust) is going to get into the air, and they are going to have higher lead exposure. It’s going to get into the soil, and kids will have more exposure.

“It all needs to be better controlled.”

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