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Get the lead out - one last time

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Fragments of yellow caution tape twist in the wind behind a litter-strewn, barbed-wire fence dotted with signs that warn: "Danger." "Lead Work Area." "Poison."

Vacant and ghostly, Master Metals Inc. no longer poses an imminent public health threat because its dirty business stopped a decade ago, and its worst problems were cleaned up.

Now, after four years of working out details to redevelop the polluted site, the federal government will begin the final cleanup of the former lead smelting works in the Flats, which was once considered the worst lead polluter in Ohio.

Crews will start this week to excavate the remaining exposed, lead-tainted soil around the site's perimeter, which is an estimated 250 truckloads, said Gwen Massenburg, project manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This soil will be treated with an additive that locks in lead so the soil can be disposed of in a landfill.

Workers also will spread a new layer of asphalt atop concrete that already covers most of the four-acre rectangular site on West 3rd Street at the foot of Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood. This will encapsulate the lead and other toxic metals in the concrete and soil underneath to prevent contact with humans and animals.

Once the \$500,000 cleanup is completed in late spring, the site will become the new home of Northern Ohio Lumber & Timber Co., a commercial lumber yard that will move its business from Carter Road in the Flats, where it has been since the 1860s. Northern Ohio Lumber needed a new home because its landlord did not renew the company's lease.

Before it moves, Northern Ohio Lumber will spend \$1.2 million to renovate a two-story cinderblock building and build a mill and three storage sheds.

The original cleanup, announced in 1999, called for burying the toxic problems under a plastic and soil barrier on the site. The only people who would have had access to this "park" would be landscapers and an occasional inspector.

But the city's Economic Development Department did not want to lose an industrial site that had rail access. So city and state leaders and a community development group, the Flats Oxbow Association, pushed the EPA to reuse the site.

The EPA agreed. So the original cleanup plan was scrapped and replaced with the plan to cover the site in asphalt, which will cost an extra \$68,000. The city, state and lumber company will share that expense.

The city also gave Northern Ohio a low-interest loan and tax abatement on improvements it makes to the property.

But it took time to negotiate with the more than 50 firms legally responsible for the cleanup and to clear the technical issues to redevelop the site. Master Metals had gone bankrupt, but the law allows the federal government to pursue firms that caused the contamination. The 50-plus companies had done business with Master Metals and the prior owner, NL Industries Inc.

"This is not a difficult site to clean up," said Bri Bill, a U.S. EPA site coordinator. "What made this site complicated and lengthy was the fact that we wanted the site redeveloped."

For six decades, Master Metals and NL Industries smashed old batteries and other lead waste, then melted the remains into lead ingots. But the process spread lead dust over the area. Regulators closed the plant for repeatedly violating air pollution regulations and for failing to protect its workers from lead contamination.

During the first quarter of 1993, Ohio EPA air monitors registered air-lead levels at Master Metals' property line that exceeded national air-quality standards by 973 percent. That same year, the company president, Douglas Mickey, was sentenced to four months in prison for doctoring records about the lead levels in his employees' blood.

Northern Ohio Lumber, which has about 15 employees, will be responsible for the next 30 years to repair any cracks in the asphalt and file annual reports with regulators.

"We feel comfortable with what we are doing," said Northern Ohio Lumber President Virgel Zanick, who had considered moving his company to Berea.

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