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North Smithfield residents question lack of transparency in well pollution problem



The Chiccarelli family, Matt, Alicia and Landon, stand in front of their home at 250 Mechanic St., North Smithfield. The family was unaware of water contamination problems in the area when they bought the home in 2015. (Breeze photo by Sandy Seoane)

By **SANDY SEOANE**, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

NORTH SMITHFIELD – Alicia and Matt Chiccarelli always shower with the window open and the vent on, as they were instructed to do last year by officials from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

Thirty cases and 20 jugs of bottled water now get delivered to their Mechanic Street home each month, used not only for the couple and their young son's drinking and cooking needs, but also given to their dog, chickens and rabbits.

They say they never imagined life would be like this when they bought the home, a raised ranch built in 1970, more than two years ago. At the time, Alicia was eight months pregnant with now 2-year-old Landon.

“Would you buy a house knowing you can’t even wash your fruit in the sink?” Alicia asked, speaking with *The Breeze* this week. “We were thinking this was our forever home.”

The Chiccarellis’ property sits amid a cluster of houses with contaminated wells, where the discovery of pollutants PCE (perchloroethylene) and TCE (trichloroethylene) and Freon 113 have led to recent investigations by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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Problems with the water at many of their neighbors’ homes were first discovered in 2004, but they say no one informed them of the issue when they purchased the house. They first learned of the contamination in July of last year.

“We got a letter from DEM saying there was water contamination in the area and offering free testing,” said Alicia. “It came as a big shock to us. RIDEM came and showed us the map of the contamination, and we are smack dab in the center.”

PCE and TCE are both widely used solvents contained in commercial, industrial and

residential products.

Water at the Chiccarellis’ house at 250 Mechanic St. has tested just at – but not above – RIDEM’s reporting standards for the chemicals, which means that, at least at the time of the test, it was considered drinkable. But the couple pointed out that levels fluctuate, and that one well with a high level of pollutants is their immediate neighbor’s.

“Legally we could drink it, but years of drinking this water could cause harm to your body and also leads to cancer,” said Alicia.

She said that showering is particularly problematic, as the chemicals are known to be breathed in through steam.

Their neighbor, who asked to remain anonymous, said he didn’t do a well test when he bought his two-family home at 246 Mechanic St. in 2009. For years, water was used in that house, with the owner unaware of any issues. He said a neighbor mentioned the contamination to him in 2014, and he ordered a test, bringing the results to RIDEM.

“They all freaked out when they saw my numbers,” he said.

The water was above reporting limits in more than a dozen categories. The discovery, combined with the revelation that two additional wells serving three properties over the state line in Millville, Mass., were polluted with the same chemicals, led the EPA to get involved.

The agency discovered contamination in two additional wells on Old Great Road in 2016, and ordered another round of testing.

In the EPA's Phase I study, released in March of 2017, five more wells were tested on Old Great Road, and pollutants beyond RIDEM standards were found at one, while a second home had PCE above the "method detection limit."

In Phase II, released last June 14, more wells were tested, and an additional home on Mechanic Street was added to the list, which now includes more than 10 properties in two states.

The Chiccarellis' house was not listed as part of either study. And their water, tested last July, contains both PCE and TCE.

RIDEM installed a point of entry treatment system at their neighbor's home at 246 Mechanic St., along with "all residences whose private wells were found to contain contaminants at concentrations greater than drinking water standards," according to RIDEM spokeswoman Gail Mastrati.

"These systems are sampled on a regular basis to ensure they are providing clean, potable water," Mastrati told The Breeze.

The Chiccarellis' neighbor says installing the treatment system helped.

"When I used to take showers, I would come out and my eyes would be so bloodshot," he said. "Since the POET system is in, I'm feeling better."

"The POET system is working, but not everyone is on one," he said.

The Chiccarelli family has been told the quality of their water isn't poor enough to qualify for the system.

They question why they were not made aware of the issue when they bought the home. Alicia and Matt are both North Smithfield natives, and they say they're grateful that when they moved back to their hometown from an apartment in neighboring Woonsocket, they were accustomed to drinking bottled water. While their pets consumed the water for the 18 months they were in the dark, they say at least their son had minimal exposure.

Now, they've hired an attorney in hopes to get the real estate broker, who they say knew about the problem, to install a filtration system at their house at a cost of \$6,000.

"I have spoken to two different appraisers who told me that they could not even come and give me a value on my house right now knowing about the problem," Alicia said.

She said she's read up on the man-made chemicals in her well. The side effects from them include kidney problems, liver problems and dizziness and worsen over time.

"Even breathing in small amounts can cause issues with a developing baby," Alicia said.

She's also tried to research the issue locally and was surprised there was not more information available. The Breeze first began reporting on the issue in late 2016 after learning of the problem from a Millville resident.

“The whole thing is just disappointing,” Alicia said. “Every time you’re showering it’s what you’re thinking of. Luckily, we weren’t making bottles for Landon with this water.”

When their neighbor brought his test results to North Smithfield officials, he says they immediately reduced his taxes by 25 percent.

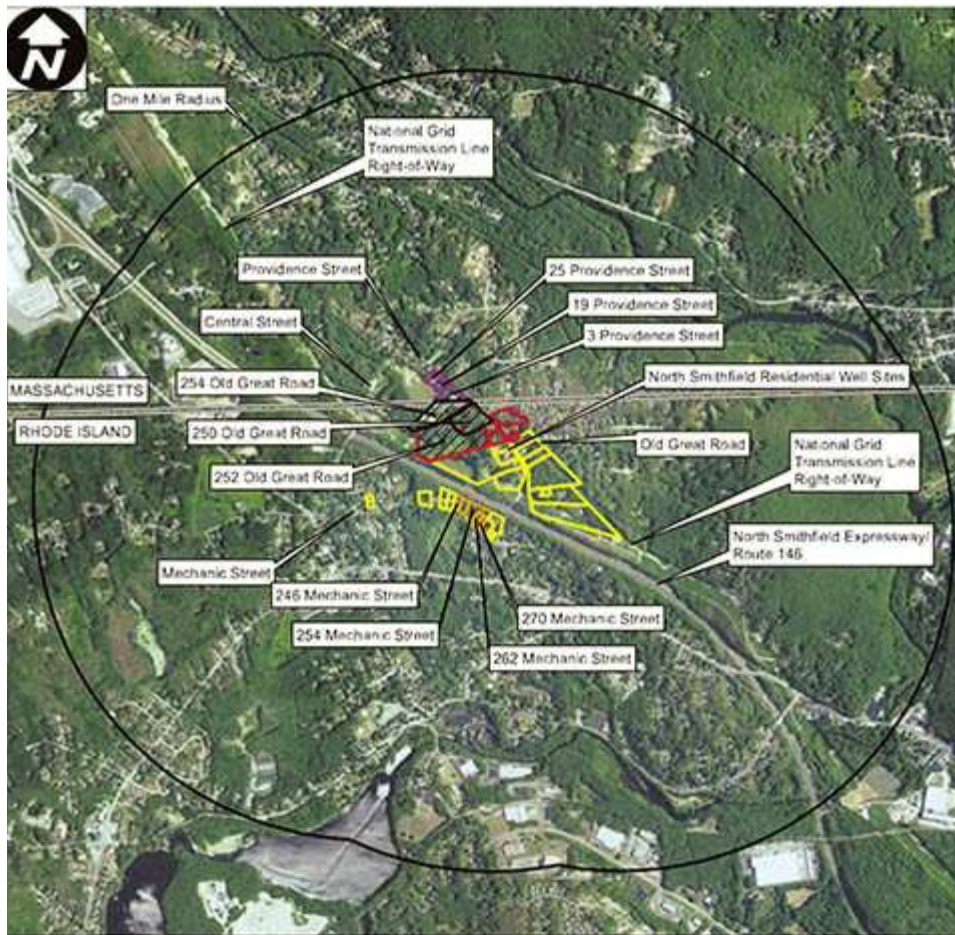
“The town was very well informed about it,” he said, noting that while RIDEM and the EPA are working to address the problem now, “it took a long time and there was a lot of deception.”

The agencies’ current focus is finding the source of the contamination and investigations were recently conducted at 465 Central St., where the well had not been affected, and 254 Old Great Road, but neither property is seen as a potential source. Reports note that there are 3,301 homes served by private wells in the area of the contamination.

“The department’s strategy is to identify the source(s) of contamination and then to develop a plan to remediate the contamination,” said Mastrati. “It is hard to speculate what exactly we will do until a specific source or sources is found, but our goal is to develop a permanent solution for the impacted wells in the Mechanic Street area.”

For her part, Alicia Chiccarelli says that while she feels wronged, her aim now is just for the peaceful enjoyment of her home.

“We didn’t want to make a huge deal out of this. We just want the problem solved,” she said. “I would never, with my own conscience, sell this to someone and not tell them.”



An aerial view shows the area of well contamination on the North Smithfield-Millville, Mass., border. A total of 10 homes are affected by the contamination.

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Comments

Disappointing

[Permalink](#) | Submitted by *Derrick L* on Thu, 2018-01-18 11:29

As someone who used to live in that area, it's really sad to find out that this entire area is polluted. I can only imagine the downstream effects this will have, especially given the national pullbacks on EPA guidelines. The natural beauty and livability for this area of North Smithfield looks to be in bad shape for the foreseeable future.

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Water lines needed

[Permalink](#) | Submitted by *kcinri6876* on Thu, 2018-01-18 12:55

Time to extend water lines from the municipal system. How long can people be expected to live like this. Time for action, until the source can be found and a long-term remedy implemented.

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Full disclosure

[Permalink](#) | Submitted by Curious on Thu, 2018-01-18 16:44

It's my understanding that real estate ppl and homeowners must disclose on paperwork any issues with a home prior to selling. Deceiving a buyer in claiming ignorance here, they knew, they were dumping the house off. Whatever became of the big fiasco of forcing the homeowners off their wells, and onto the municipal system years ago?? It was to be quite an expense for the individual homeowner and was stopped in Phase II I think?? What a coincidence this turn of events is as to the wells. I think the contamination goes further, we shall see.

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Were the people living in

[Permalink](#) | Submitted by LocalsOnly on Thu, 2018-01-18 19:38

Were the people living in this area ever notified? My parents live smack dab in the middle of this circle, I lived there up until a few years ago. I spoke with both of them, we never received any type of notification that this was an issue. If the town was aware of this, that is absolutely disgusting.

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polluted wells

[Permalink](#) | Submitted by jacksondeant on Fri, 2018-01-19 15:30

I grew up on Mechanic st further down the hill from those poisoned wells and it stands to reason that since with gravity water runs downhill that there may have been problems with my private well

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