School containing asbestos stays open

By MIKE STAGG
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OPELOUSAS — The St. Landry Parish School Board voted Tuesday night not to order the immediate closure of Northeast Elementary School even though there is fibrous asbestos in classrooms there.

Meeting in a special session from which two members were absent, the board voted 6-4 with one abstention to order air quality tests at all seven schools in the parish where the material has been found.

The motion ordering the tests also includes provision for another special board meeting should asbestos fibers be found in the air at those schools.

The board further directed School Superintendent Henry Montell to continue his search for a consultant whose job it will be to advise the board on the best method of dealing with the asbestos in parish schools.

Board member Joshua Pitre of Opelousas moved for the immediate closure of the elementary school after he learned that fibrous asbestos was present in the blown insulation on ceilings in classrooms.

Pitre, who has children attending the school, said he had consulted with Montell, and they had concluded that students there could be shifted to other schools for the remainder of the school year. Pitre’s motion on the matter called for students there to finish out the year in classrooms at Washington High School and East Junior High in Opelousas.

Dr. Davy Bernard, of the Physics Department at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, attended the meeting to report on air tests he conducted over the weekend at Northeast Elementary. Bernard said the samples showed no traces of asbestos fibers in the air. He said he took samples for six and a half hours in one room at the school.

Parish Supervisor of Maintenance Richard Dronet told the board that janitors at the school said the classroom tested had the worst ceiling of any at the school.

Parents of students at Northeast Elementary and other Opelousas schools read from Environmental Protection Agency asbestos guidelines which stated that testing should be done under normal circumstances. The parents and Pitre argued that the test was not valid because students were not in the classroom.

Dronet said the asbestos is present in classrooms at South Street Elementary in Opelousas, Glendale Elementary in Eunice and at Lawtell Elementary in Lawtell.

Pitre said EPA warning signs posted on those school buildings were an indication to him that the asbestos in the classroom presented “a clear and present threat to the health and well-being of our children.”

Board member Gladys Cunningham seconded Pitre’s move to close the school.

Gus Breaux offered a substitute motion that tests be conducted at all schools where there is fibrous asbestos, with the students present, and that the results be presented to the board at its meeting May 3. Dale Richard seconded the substitute motion.

Voting in favor of the substitute motion were Breaux, Richard, W.G. McNeil, Martin Roy, Ms. Belle Manuel and board President Vernon McManus. Voting against the substitute motion were Pitre, Ms. Cunningham, Gilbert Austin and Bryant Goudeau, Ronnie Carriere abstained, while board members Chester Wimberley and Dr. Jack Ortego were absent.