Public sounds off about Altama Elementary site

By Pamela Permar Shierling

About 75 people including county commissioners, Mayor Cornell Harvey, and members of the Brunswick Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce showed up for the regular Glynn County Board of Education (BOE) meeting (May 8) to voice their displeasure with the BOE’s Altama Elementary School site choice.

Rachael Thompson, Project Manager, Glynn Environmental Coalition (GEC) was the first to speak during the public portion of the meeting.

The replacement Altama Elementary School is scheduled to be built behind the current school which would place it closer to the Hercules 009 Landfill site.

Ms. Thompson stated that GEC’s initial recommendation is not to build the new school 1,500 ft. from a Superfund site. Ms. Thompson said that the most recent five year review of the 009 Superfund site (published by the EPA Sept. 2016) states “in order for the remedy to be protective in the long term, the following recommendations should be addressed:

• site stakeholders should finalize and implement institutional controls that restrict land use and groundwater use until cleanup goals are met.
• data down gradient (south) of monitoring well N-5 should be collected and assessed to refine the extent of the groundwater contamination.

This is what the 2016 EPA report says about benzene.

Historically, the benzene concentrations at the easternmost permanent groundwater monitoring well N-5 have fluctuated above the maximum contaminant level. In order to determine the Eastern perimeter of the benzene plume detected at monitoring well N-5, the EPA requested that Hercules conduct additional investigations.

On September 8-9, 2010, Antea Group, on behalf of Hercules, conducted groundwater assessment activities at the Site in both the shallow zone of the surficial aquifer at depths of 16 to 20 feet below ground surface and in the deep zone of the surficial aquifer, up to 49 ft below ground surface. Sampling results revealed benzene contamination and as a result the contractors expanded the testing radius.

The most recent temporary well sampling in February 2011, detected benzene in shallow surficial temporary monitoring wells TW-14S and TW-19S and in deep surficial aquifer temporary monitoring well TW-19D at concentrations exceeding the maximum contaminant level.

Hercules provided a sampling report and recommended installing permanent confirmatory monitoring wells to the east of N-5. Hercules pursued obtaining access from the owner for permanent wells and was unsuccessful in this effort. No additional permanent wells have been installed to date.

The current Altama School site is located east and south of the Superfund Site. The EPA report indicates the benzene plume is migrating toward the east.
Ms. Thompson recommended that the BOE notify Hercules, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Congressman Buddy Carter of the proposed site location and request that the EPA recommendations begin immediately to ensure protection of human health and the environment and that the new school building is protected in the long term.

“Additionally,” she said, “the BOE should request that Hercules treat the benzene plume to eliminate any risk of it moving onto county property. There are known remedies to treat the plume and remove the risk completely.”

Ron Adams spoke to the board saying he had researched state records to see if there was a law that prohibited placing a school next to a superfund site or landfill.

He said, “The head of the Georgia EPD Land Protection Branch said there was no such law; that they had never anticipated that a school system would even contemplate placing a school next to a land fill or superfund site.”

“Some things are just common sense,” he said.

“If you had just completed a new school, and someone proposed putting an industrial landfill adjacent to your brand new school, would you stand for it?” he asked. “Would you allow that to happen?”

“I submit to you I don’t think any of you would. I think you would stand up and say no. This is the same situation,” Adams continued, “its just in reverse.” “Why would you site a new school adjacent to a landfill much less a superfund site. There’s not a good reason,” he said.

Jen Hilburn, Altamaha Riverkeeper spoke next. “You have an amazing opportunity to move children away from a toxic site (current Altama Elementary has been on the site for about 50 years). Why isn’t the money being used to secure another site?”

“If the facilities staff says the site is safe now then finds out later the site isn’t safe, what’s the likelihood that they will inform their superiors?” she asked. “What’s the likelihood that their superiors will inform the Board of Education and what’s the likelihood that the board will inform the public?”

“In reality it’s much more likely that this information would be covered up or set aside,” she said.

She pointed out that sentinel wells have to be monitored regularly. “If toxins are found, the correct steps must be taken and that would mean,” she said, “the school would have to be moved.”

Hilburn quoted from the state Dept. of Education’s Guideline for Risk Hazard Assessment of Educational Facility Sites: Planners are encouraged not to locate educational facilities in run-down neighborhoods, industrial or commercial developments, sites close to landfills and dumps, and isolated, barren areas.

“I argue that you are doing just that,” Hilburn said.

Susan Wendell, concerned citizen, Brunswick High graduate, mother of five, and former educator, pointed out that building the school on the current site was contradictory to the system’s own mission.
statement which hangs on the board room wall. We ensure that all decisions are made in the best interest of the students and our schools will be safe places for learning.

Trae Ross, who is running for the At Large Post 1 BOE seat against incumbent Mike Hulsey, asked the board if they had considered a cost analysis based on the mitigation of the Altama site. “You could take that money and probably even buy another piece of property within a mile and a half radium of the current site,” he said. “We should be paying a premium for the safety and health of these kids.”

The final speaker was the Altama Elementary School principal, Michelle Drew.

Ms. Drew said, “The one thing I am hearing is that the children are at the heart of this decision.”

“I am also hearing mistrust,” she continued, “that the board, the superintendent, all concerned with our students are going to make the right decision.”

Ms. Drew continued to say she believed the board had done their due diligence. She said that during the past few days after learning of the continued concern that she and her staff had educated themselves about what was going on.

“We found from outside sources that they (the BOE) are telling the truth,” she said.

“The risk factor at this point is going to be the same risk factor found in any area,” she said, “based on what I’ve read or heard based on the sites that we have.”

“If I’m wrong, I’m going to find out. If they (the BOE) are wrong, they are going to find out. They (the BOE) are not going to stop until they find the correct solution.”

“I believe that placing our school where it is is not going to be detrimental to our children,” she said. I do believe the right decision is to build the new school where it is located (behind the current Altama Elementary,” Ms. Drew continued.

She said parents were at the meeting who had done their own research support the decision to build the new school at the Altama site.

Then she asked that everyone work together to find a solution.

“Yes we are going to make the right decision for our children and I honestly, truly believe that it is to build the school at the proposed Altama site,” she said. BOE Facilities Committee Chair Millard Allen told The Islander,

“We (the BOE) have done all we can do. The tests show there is no dangerous material there. We have had a school there for 50 years. We would not put any child there if we thought there was an issue. The community wants the school there.”

Sen. William Ligon (R-3) was not at the meeting but did speak to The Islander about the proposed Altama Elementary site.

Sen. Ligon said that the state has an interest in insuring school sites are suitable regarding safety and are acceptable to the community. “The state wants schools located in a good environment,” he said.

“What we have here is a landfill and a dump with material that can be harmful, maybe not today but in the future. This causes great concern at the state level,” he said. “The site application may very well be denied. The Glynn County Board of Education has a high burden of proof (for this site) to overcome. The community should have confidence they are sending their children to a safe environment.”

According to the Georgia State Department of Education spokesperson, “In August 2017, Glynn County made an application for state funds for a new Altama Elementary facility at 4000 Habersham Street in Brunswick.

“This funding request was approved as part of the FY19 bond budget and these funds will become available to the school system once the bonds are sold and all criteria for reimbursement are met. The amount of state funding available to the district for this project is $5,652,866.

“Subsequent to the approval mentioned above, Glynn County Schools informed us of their intention to change the proposed site to the existing Altama Elementary facility at 5505 Altama Avenue in Brunswick.

“We informed them that a new site application reflecting this site is required prior to commencing any construction activities at the 5505 Altama location. As of this date, we haven’t received a site application for a proposed elementary facility at 5505 Altama Avenue.

“Once a site application is received for the newly proposed site, GaDOE will review the information provided and establish the suitability of the site and direct any mitigations that will be required to address any identified risks or hazards as established in the Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA).

“It is typical for risks and/or hazards to be enumerated that require mitigations in order for school systems to commence construction. These mitigations must be addressed in architectural drawings submitted to GaDOE for review and approval.”