

Ferguson To Hold Town Meeting On Mercury Removal

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Rep. Mike Ferguson will hold a town meeting Monday on the scheduled removal this summer of nearly 2,700 metric tons of mercury from the military depot in Hillsborough.

The town meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Monday at the Municipal Building, 379 South Branch Road.

Ferguson said the town meeting will feature presentations from Cornel Holder, the administrator of the Pentagon's Defense National Stockpile Center, which oversees the Hillsborough depot; Essie Schloss, the center's deputy administrator; and Scott Romans, the center's counsel.

Hillsborough Mayor Anthony Ferrera and Somerset County officials also will attend the meeting, Ferguson said.

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), a branch of the Pentagon, operates the Defense National Stockpile Center.

Ferguson asked agency officials to personally brief residents on the transfer -- scheduled for this summer -- of 2,671 tons of mercury from the Somerville Defense National Stockpile Depot on Route 206 in Hillsborough to an Army facility in Hawthorne, Nev.

Since 2001 Ferguson has led a community effort to persuade military officials to remove the mercury from the Hillsborough facility.

"Local residents are rightly concerned about the presence of mercury in their community, and this town meeting will be an opportunity for Pentagon officials to address their concerns and answer their questions," Ferguson said. "As I've advocated for the last six years that the mercury should be removed from Hillsborough, DLA officials have been cooperative and professional, and I'm confident they will thoroughly answer residents' questions about this critically important issue."

Ferguson said agency officials will update residents on the agency's plans to consolidate the nation's excess mercury at the Nevada Army base, current safety measures at the Hillsborough depot and precautions to be taken when the mercury is transferred.

Mercury has been stored on the 77-acre Hillsborough depot since the 1940s. Local officials only realized mercury was stored there when additional mercury was transported to the site from Binghamton, N.Y., in 2000. Currently, 75,880 flasks of mercury are sealed in 12,647 steel drums in warehouses at the depot, according to the DLA.

Ferguson has long advocated for the mercury's removal, urging military officials to consolidate the nation's excess mercury at a safer, more remote location. He even wrote legislation prohibiting the defense agency from shipping additional mercury to Hillsborough while the agency conducted detailed environmental studies and public hearings around the country on the consolidation plan.

After the 2001 terrorist attacks, Ferguson said the mercury posed both a security and environmental risk to residents in Hillsborough and surrounding communities.

"It was a bad idea before 9/11, and it's an even worse idea after 9/11 to store mercury in a growing residential community like Hillsborough," Ferguson said.

Ferguson announced last February that the defense agency has decided the Hawthorne Army base in

Hawthorne, Nev., would house the mercury currently stored in Hillsborough and depots in New Haven, Ind., and Warren, Ohio. Beginning last year, the Nevada facility began security and storage upgrades in preparation for the transfer.

For more information about the town meeting, residents should call Ferguson's New Jersey office at (908) 757-7835.