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Blog drives asbestos debate

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A blog-driven debate over whether or not there is asbestos in Hyannis water shows no signs of abating.

The way Gary Lopez tells it in frequent Web postings, Barnstable town officials are not giving residents the whole story when it comes to the presence of asbestos in Hyannis water pipes. Lopez and others applied enough pressure to the Barnstable Department of Public Works and town council that the issue of asbestos-concrete pipe was discussed at a recent council meeting and got a commitment to have more frequent testing conducted to monitor asbestos levels in water.

In the face of the constant criticism, Barnstable DPW Director Mark Ells defends the testing regimen of taking samples once a year in five locations. This, he said exceeds state mandates for testing.

"Asbestos levels are non-detectable in all five locations," Ells said Tuesday afternoon.

Lopez said Tuesday he does not believe Ells' statements that no detectable levels of asbestos were found. He contends that samples should be taken "downstream" of the asbestos pipes to produce a true reading.

Lopez says his organization, Citizens for Open Government, has already been in touch with a New York testing lab and will conduct its own tests of Hyannis water.

"We are going to take water from a tap at Barnstable High School," Lopez said Tuesday,

"because kids from all over Barnstable go there."

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has set seven asbestos fibers per liter as the acceptable level of asbestos in water.

Ells said the town knew about the asbestos-concrete pipes when it purchased the water system from the Connecticut Water Company this year and he believes the situation is manageable. Ells said a chemical is added to the water in Hyannis to coat the insides of the pipes in order to prevent asbestos from getting into the water.

"If we had corrosive water, it could be a problem," Ells said. "That's why we treat the water."

Ells acknowledged the asbestos-concrete pipe "can be brittle" and that the town would probably replace the pipes as road construction is being done in the areas where the pipes are located.

Ells said the barrage of criticism from bloggers and some who attend town council meetings is creating a "misperception" about the situation.

"They are trying to create a scare that doesn't need to exist," Ells said.

Airborne asbestos is a known carcinogen. However, there is no scientific evidence linking water-borne asbestos to illness. Lopez said, however, that one of his concerns is that as Hyannis water evaporates, asbestos may become airborne, "posing a risk of cancer to the lungs."