

ENVIRONMENT

Off EPA's priorities list, Fairfax Street pollution cleanup celebrated as 'poster child'

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The head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency joined Jacksonville officials Monday to celebrate completion of a pollution cleanup that let the former Fairfax Street Wood Treating site be removed from EPA's National Priorities List.

"This is a poster child of what I want to see happen" at Superfund sites around the country, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler told people gathered under a tent on the 12-acre site at 2610 Fairfax St.

"...Children were playing in these yards and we needed to get this cleaned up as quick as possible," Wheeler said.

It was 2012 when the property was added to EPA's priorities list – a roll of badly polluted sites where the government handles cleanup because no one else has found the money to handle things quickly.

The wood-treating company that had operated since 1980 had gone bankrupt and closed in 2010, leaving tanks of chemicals in poor condition and stormwater flowing off the property.

Tests showed the area was tainted by substances in chromated copper arsenate, a compound used to pressure-treat lumber to resist rotting.

While some properties stay on the priorities list for decades, work at Fairfax Street unfolded relatively quickly.

Crews excavated and replaced polluted soil near neighboring Susie E. Tolbert Elementary and R.V. Daniels Elementary, then later in the yards around 51 homes of the community about six blocks west of Myrtle Avenue and south of the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway.

About 60,000 tons of tainted soil were trucked away and replaced with new soil, and an estimated 300,000 gallons of water were processed to decontaminate the area.

“The EPA came in like a knight on a white horse,” James Parris, founder of the Temple College Preparatory school across the street, told people at a gathering to mark the cleanup’s completion. “It took a minute. It took a while. But I’m glad I was part of the 10-year process.”

The property was actually removed from the priorities list in August, but it wasn’t a change that had caught people’s attention.

With the land cleaned, it can be used for pretty much anything, Wheeler said, although it’s not clear what the site story’s next chapter will involve.

The property belongs to the city now, having been lost for unpaid taxes by a former owner.

City Council member Garrett Dennis said he and council member Ju’Coby Pittman, who both have personal roots in the neighborhood and were at the gathering, will be holding a noticed meeting soon to begin a conversation about a new purpose for the site.