

# Healthy Building News

## Perspectives on the Future of Healthy Building

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### Community Roots of the Green Building Movement

by Lois Gibbs

For the past twenty years, I have been working with thousands of communities advocating to eliminate our families' exposure to toxics and to shift the U.S. economy toward green building and green manufacturing. Our work is about community sustainability, the "roots" of the green building movement.

Take, for example, communities that are home to manufacturing plants that discharge toxic chemicals into the air, water and soil. Families are confronted with high rates of children with birth defects, chronic illnesses or learning disabilities. In many instances, however, the plant is critical to the local economy, and families don't want it closed. They are calling on corporate leaders to manufacture products that don't contaminate the environment and the food supply or make people sick.

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### Mossville, LA looks to Green Building for Relief

by Monique Harden

The largest concentration of PVC or vinyl manufacturers in the United States is found in historic Mossville, Louisiana, an unincorporated African-American community located outside the city of Lake Charles. Mossville residents have seen PVC plants expand to the point that their operations are just across the street from some local homes. From these factories come towering red flames that form massive black clouds, toxic chemicals that have sickening noxious odors, and industrial discharges piped into lakes and bayous.

Chemotherapy treatments and constant visits to doctors are now a regular part of Mossville residents' lives. Significant levels of dioxin, an unavoidable by-product of PVC production, have been detected in the blood of Mossville residents. Three of the people tested for dioxin exposure have died from cancer and one has become bedridden. Teen-age girls and women are suffering from endometriosis, a painful reproductive disease that has taken the life of one Mossville woman. [CONTINUED ON BACK PAGE](#)

### Editor's Note

*In this edition of the Healthy Building News, we turn over our pages to some of the nation's leading grassroots environmental activists, who discuss the connection between their work, their communities and the green building movement. Some of the activists featured here, Lois Gibbs for example, have been grassroots leaders for a decade or more, and their work greatly influenced the founding and mission of the Healthy Building Network.*

*Others, such as Johanna Congelton of Physicians for Social Responsibility in Los Angeles, came recently to our attention because the community problems they face are directly connected to the manufacture of building materials.*

*The Healthy Building Network was founded in order to bring the leaders of front-line environmental struggles into dialogue with leaders in the emerging green building movement. We organize strategic campaigns made up of interest groups all along the lifecycle of a building material. It was just such a coalition who earlier this year convinced the arsenic treated wood industry to agree to a voluntary phase-out of CCA lumber at the retail level as of the end of 2003.*

*Our top priority now is PVC plastic, also known as vinyl. Environmental health activists worldwide*

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## Editor's Note CONTINUED FROM FRONT

target vinyl, more than any other plastic— or any other single building material—because its lifecycle is associated with a broad range of demonstrated and suspected environmental health threats. Communities that are home to PVC production facilities and vinyl product manufacturing operations are suffering from documented exposures to extremely toxic chemicals, including vinyl chloride and dioxin, both human carcinogens. They are also fighting back, and in these pages some of them appeal directly to the green building movement for support. For example, the U.S. Green Building Council has postponed consideration of a “vinyl elimination credit” for its LEED-Commercial Interiors rating system (originally proposed in Summer 2000), pending a scientific review by the council's Technical Science Advisory Committee (TSAC). As of this writing, neither TSAC's members nor a schedule for release of the committee's findings have been publicly announced. In our Resources section, you will find websites for the writers featured here. Please feel free to contact the Healthy Building Network if you would like more information.

— Bill Walsh, National Coordinator, Healthy Building Network



### Demand for Healthy Alternatives is Growing

by Bill Smedley

Before starting GreenWatch in 1998, I was a green builder doing carpentry, plumbing and electrical work, so I am very familiar with the options (or lack of options) for green building materials available to the contracting community. Then, my customers wanted the most “green” house that could be built, regardless of the up-front price.

Today, the market for green building has expanded from those who could afford green at any cost to the average consumer. Most people understand that, more than ever, we need non-toxic products in our homes.

People are demanding information about the chemicals used in building products.

A significant number of GreenWatch investigations have centered around industries producing building materials that have an adverse affect upon the surrounding community. Because building materials make up such a large sector of our economy, it is not uncommon to find a manufacturer or supplier linked to community toxic problems.

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**A significant number of GreenWatch investigations have centered around industries producing building materials.**  
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In every GreenWatch investigation we conduct, citizens are increasingly concerned with the growing incidence of cancer and the poor health of their families. The public is slowly gaining a better understanding of the impacts that toxins and toxic products are having on their families and communities. Both fenceline residents and consumers nationwide want answers to their health questions regarding the manufacturing, use and disposal of building products.

At the Green Building Conference at Penn State University this year, it was clear that progressive thinkers are moving away from toxic materials towards the future: sustainable, healthy housing. For example, no vinyl products could be found in any exhibits at the conference. Progress is being made. Education of both consumers and designers is playing a major role—many of those in attendance had seen Bill Moyer's special *Trade Secrets* and had heard about or seen the film *Blue Vinyl*, both of which explain the damage done to the health of workers and communities by the vinyl industry. To adapt to the changing market, industry needs to modify their manufacturing methods, or they will be replaced by progressive new manufacturing that produce the truly green products consumers demand.

*Bill Smedley is executive director for GreenWatch, a Pennsylvania-based group that assists citizens and communities fighting environmental problems in the United States with investigation, research and education.*



### Seattle Decides to Buy Right

by Laurie Valeriano

In July 2002, the Seattle City Council became the first city in the nation to pass a resolution to reduce the purchase and use of products that result in persistent toxic pollution such as dioxin, mercury and other heavy metals.

This resolution is significant not only for Seattle—where the city's purchase of more environmentally preferable products will mean less exposure to toxics for Seattle residents—but for other city and state governments looking to take meaningful action to create a healthy future for our children.

Seattle's action is part of a larger statewide effort to eliminate persistent toxic pollution. In 2000, the Washington Department of Ecology adopted a policy to eliminate these chemicals because they are particularly dangerous. They build up in the environment and in the food chain, are passed to our children in the womb and through breast milk, and can cause health effects at very low levels of exposure. Persistent toxic chemicals such as dioxin for example, have also been linked to certain cancers and to birth defects and reproductive problems, including endometriosis.

Seattle's resolution specifically addresses PVC building materials because they are estimated to be the largest material source of dioxin and a notable source of numerous persistent toxic chemicals.

By pursuing a purchasing policy, the City of Seattle will increase the demand for cleaner alternatives that do not result in persistent toxic pollution. The Washington Toxics Coalition and Healthy Building Network are working together to ensure this resolution is fully implemented. We look to the green building movement to help us identify the healthiest alternatives in building materials for the future.

*Laurie Valeriano is policy director for The Washington Toxics Coalition, which advocates for alternatives to pesticides, persistent toxic chemicals, and toxic cleaning products for use by industry, agriculture, institutions and consumers.*



### An Ordinary Consumer Finds a Toxic Comedy in *Blue Vinyl*

by Judith Helfand

For four and a half years I traveled across America along with my co-director, award winning-cinematographer Daniel B. Gold, searching for the truth about vinyl, America's most popular plastic. The vinyl in my life was on my parent's house, maintenance-free siding that was my father's answer to rotten wood.

Our journey took us from suburban Long Island, to Lake Charles, Louisiana, the vinyl capital of the U.S., to Venice, Italy, where vinyl executives were on trial for manslaughter, and to Americus, Georgia, where the Vinyl Institute was sponsoring a “blitz build” of homes for low-income families. The result is the feature documentary *Blue Vinyl*, which won a Sundance Film Festival award for Excellence in Cinematography and was broadcast to millions last May on HBO.

One of the many pleasant surprises of our investigation was a first-hand introduction to the emerging green building movement. The scenes where we introduce Patrick, a green builder from California (who explains the need for building materials to have soul) to my parents in Merrick, Long Island (who explain the need to make their house saleable), are the stuff, I'm told, cult movies are made of. The fact that we met so many people, working on so many products, offering so many solutions, inspired the film's upbeat conclusion.

To help ordinary consumers find environmental resources and green building alternatives, we helped forge a campaign and website, “www.myhouseisyourhouse.org”. But individual consumers should not have to bear the burden of the toxic lifecycle of PVC. We need a green building movement that stands for the truth alongside the environmental activists who've created public awareness. Simply put, when the healthy alternatives to vinyl are easy to buy at Home Depot, we know our job is getting close to well done.

*Judith Helfand is co-director of Blue Vinyl and director of the Peabody Award-winning A Healthy Baby Girl, which chronicles her experiences with cancer resulting from her mother's exposure to DES, a drug prescribed to prevent miscarriage.*



### PVC Pollution Harms California Town

by Johanna Congelton

Saugus, California, is home to a company that produces PVC plastic resin for vinyl flooring and several other consumer products. The company is currently under investigation by the Environmental Protection Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation for excessive chemical emissions, unsafe employee exposure to toxic substances and illegal disposal of hazardous waste.

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**In the 1960s, an elementary school located a half mile from this facility was closed due to extremely high levels of vinyl chloride—a highly toxic chemical known to cause a variety of cancers—in the ambient air.**  
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In the 1960s, an elementary school located a half mile from this facility was closed due to extremely high levels of vinyl chloride—a highly toxic chemical known to cause a variety of cancers—in the ambient air. Forty years later, a significant number of people who attended the school as children have died of brain tumors, breast cancer and other illnesses. Employees have had liver cancer and circulatory disorders, both “markers” of vinyl chloride exposure. And larger facilities in Louisiana, Texas and Pennsylvania that supply PVC to the same flooring manufacturers have also been linked to serious worker and public health impacts.

Because construction projects provide the largest market for PVC products, the building industry offers the greatest opportunity for moving the market away from these dangerous materials. The green building movement has the power to make decisions that will echo across the country—helping communities from Saugus, California, to Mossville, Louisiana.

*Johanna Congelton is the public health associate for Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles, a non-profit organization dedicated to preventing environmental health threats, gun violence, and nuclear proliferation.*

## THE HEALTHY BUILDING INSPECTOR



### FAILS INSPECTION:

U.S. Green Building Council members **Armstrong World Industries, Amtico,**

**Mannington Mills** and **Domco Tarkett** for knowingly misrepresenting the LEED rating system to lawmakers. A trade association has filed a lawsuit on behalf of the companies, charging that New York's green building tax credit for linoleum, cork and bamboo flooring, “contradicts” LEED because it does not classify vinyl as a green material. Last year, the companies made the same claim to New Jersey lawmakers. In a letter to the state of New Jersey, the USGBC called this characterization of LEED “not accurate.”



### UP TO CODE:

**Seattle City Council**, which in July passed a resolution to reduce the purchase and

use of products that result in persistent toxic pollution such as dioxin and mercury. The resolution specifically addresses polyvinyl chloride (PVC) building materials. Seattle's action is part of a larger statewide effort to eliminate persistent toxic pollution.

*Got a tip for the Healthy Building Inspector? email [info@healthybuilding.net](mailto:info@healthybuilding.net)*

## HEALTHY BUILDING NEWS FAST FACT

Last year's successful grassroots campaign to phase-out retail sales of arsenic based, pressure-treated (CCA) wood will shift approximately **85 percent of the total market to arsenic free product**. In rough numbers this agreement will result in an annual decrease in production, use and ultimate release of almost 116 million pounds of CCA solution. That's 28 million pounds of pure arsenic infused into 6.4 billion board feet of CCA wood.

*This tip sheet is printed on Astrolite PC100, a process chlorine-free paper with 100% post-consumer waste content.*

## Perspectives on the Future of Healthy Building

### Community Roots of the Green Building Movement CONTINUED FROM FRONT

As the Center for Health, Environment and Justice has worked with these communities, we've looked to the new green building movement as our allies. This expanding group of designers, manufacturers and consumers dedicated to green building is critical to taking our work to a new and expanded level. For example, in CHEJ's children's health project, parents have begun to educate and motivate school districts to build green schools and to purchase green products. Other national campaigns are underway to ensure the air quality and green building standards in health care, state and city building projects.

However, this work can only succeed if the movement is credible and has high standards of accreditation. Green washing—pretending to be green when in fact the product is not—could negate all the good that has been gained over the years. The large-scale economic shift necessary to truly impact our environment has begun. Leaders of this movement need to ensure it moves forward credibly.

*Lois Gibbs is the executive director of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, a national non-profit organization she founded after leading the fight to clean up Love Canal. CHEJ assists communities nationwide faced with environmental health threats.*

### Mossville, LA looks to Green Building for Relief CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Mossville residents have organized to reduce pollution and facility accidents, find resources for community health services, and advocate for environmental justice and sustainable

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**The support of architects and builders for a healthy environment is best demonstrated by eliminating their demand for PVC building materials.**

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development. The support of architects and builders for a healthy environment is best demonstrated by eliminating their demand for PVC building materials. Part of their goal of creating a safe and secure place for people to live and work needs to be ensuring that people's health and lives are not threatened by the production or development of materials that are used in building construction.

*Monique Harden is an environmental lawyer who provides legal services and support to Mossville Environmental Action Now, Inc., a grassroots community organization dedicated to environmental justice and bringing about a sustainable and healthy environment.*



#### NOW AVAILABLE:

The report **“Environmental Impacts of Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) Building Materials”** by Joe Thornton, an expansion of “Pandora's Poison: On Chlorine, Health and a New Environmental Strategy,” of which *Nature* magazine wrote: “As a reference work alone, it is a masterpiece.” Hard copies are \$20<sup>00</sup> each. **To order, contact [info@healthybuilding.net](mailto:info@healthybuilding.net).**

#### HEALTHY BUILDING NETWORK RESOURCES

Visit the following links to learn more about the organizations discussed in this issue.

**The Center for Health and Environmental Justice**  
[www.chej.org](http://www.chej.org)

**GreenWatch**  
[www.greenwatchusa.org](http://www.greenwatchusa.org)

**The Washington Toxics Coalition**  
[www.watoxics.org](http://www.watoxics.org)

**Blue Vinyl and My House is Your House**  
[www.bluevinyl.org](http://www.bluevinyl.org)  
[www.myhouseisyourhouse.org](http://www.myhouseisyourhouse.org)

**Physicians for Social Responsibility**  
[www.psr.org](http://www.psr.org)

**Mossville Environmental Action Now**  
[www.mapcruzin.com/mossville/reportondioxin.htm](http://www.mapcruzin.com/mossville/reportondioxin.htm)

**Healthy Building Network**  
[www.healthybuilding.net](http://www.healthybuilding.net)

The Healthy Building Network is a project of the Institute for Local Self Reliance, [www.ilsr.org](http://www.ilsr.org). Media inquiries, contact Carl Vogel at Valerie Denney Communications, 312.408.2580. For more information about the Healthy Building Network, call Bill Walsh at 202.232.4108 or see [www.healthybuilding.net](http://www.healthybuilding.net).