

COURTESY TRANSLATION

Longueuil, May 26, 2020

TO THE ATTENTION OF THE PARENTS OF STUDENTS ATTENDING ST-JOHN'S SCHOOL IN SAINT-JEAN-SUR-RICHELIEU

On April 19, 2020, a major fire occurred at Lanart Rug, a business located on Saint-Louis Street whose property is adjacent to St-Johns School. Following this incident, officials at St-Johns School found debris from Lanart Rug in the schoolyard and on the roof of the school. Some of this debris contains asbestos. Riverside School Board notified the Montérégie Public Health Department on May 6.

Why do we need to worry about asbestos?

Asbestos is a fibrous rock that is fire-resistant and a good insulator. This is why asbestos is often found in industrial buildings such as the one at Lanart Rug.

Asbestos can be a health hazard when fibres detach from materials and disperse into the air. This can happen when a material containing asbestos deteriorates due to normal wear and tear or as a result of an accident, such as a fire (heat breaks down the materials and makes them brittle). Maintenance, construction or demolition work can also generate high concentrations of asbestos fibres in the air.

Asbestos is known to be carcinogenic. Exposure must therefore be reduced to a minimum, even when it is within the prescribed standards. Asbestos fibres enter the body through the respiratory tract. The risk of developing a health problem related to asbestos increases if large quantities of asbestos are breathed in repeatedly for long periods. Asbestos in dust deposited on the ground or on a surface does not pose a health risk unless it is re-suspended in the air by activities (e.g., sweeping) or drafts.

What is the current situation at Lanart Carpets?

- A significant portion of the walls of the Lanart Rug warehouse was destroyed and the portion of the walls still in place is in poor condition. The Lanart Rug warehouse will have to be demolished.
- All materials and debris resulting from the fire on the Lanart Rug property are considered to be contaminated with asbestos. These can crumble and release asbestos fibres into the environment, in greater or lesser amounts depending on the weather (e.g. rain, wind, etc.).
- Fires are still active (smoke, bad odours) on the Lanart Rug property. The entanglement of debris resulting from the fire prevents the fire department from quickly putting it out completely.
- There are currently no measures in place to limit the dispersion of asbestos fibres from the property. The presence of the still active fire sites prevents the implementation of such measures (e.g. installation of tarps) and delays possible demolition work. Major work is to be expected at Lanart Rug and this work will have to be carried out under strict conditions in order to avoid releasing asbestos fibres back into the environment; however, we do not know when this work will take place.

What is the current situation at St-Johns School?

Because St. Johns School has been closed since March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there would have been no asbestos from the fire inside the school. Riverside School Board mandated specialized services to clean the school exterior (roof, schoolyard) and ventilation ducts. This cleaning work should eliminate the asbestos detected on the property following the fire.

However:

1. The close proximity between St-Johns School and the Lanart Rug warehouse;
2. The absence of measures at Lanart Rug to limit the spread of asbestos created by the debris and materials still on site;
3. And the prospect of future demolition and clean-up work at this company means that it is possible for the asbestos to once again find its way back into the school, both inside and outside the building. Dust or debris from asbestos-containing materials may be found in the schoolyard, and the movement of staff and students going in and out of the building will transport this contaminant back into the school. Opening windows and restarting the ventilation system could also contribute to the transport of asbestos fibres into the school.

To keep asbestos out of the school:

1. Students and teachers must not have access to the schoolyard;
2. The school administration must:
 - keep windows closed and reduce the use of the school's ventilation system, which may be difficult to do in hot weather;
 - clean its facilities on a regular basis to prevent the accumulation of dust possibly containing asbestos from being re-suspended in the air.

What is the Public Health Department's recommendation to protect the health of the students and staff of St-Johns School?

The temporary closure of the school means that students have not been exposed to asbestos to date. For teachers and staff who have entered the school since April 19, the limited exposure to asbestos detected outside the school is not expected to pose a significant health risk. It would be desirable that this situation remain as it is.

Therefore, on May 15, as a precautionary measure, the Public Health Department recommended to the Riverside School Board that the school remain closed for at least the remainder of the current school year (June 23, 2020). However, students, teachers and administrative staff may return to the school for short periods of time to retrieve personal belongings or records.

Rest assured that the Public Health Department is monitoring the situation closely and is working in collaboration with Riverside School Board to ensure the health and safety of students and staff at St-Johns School.

The Montérégie Public Health Director,

Julie Loslier, M.D., M. Sc., FRCPC