



Woburn residents jam auditorium of Trinity Episcopal Church for last night's discussion of report on contamination of city's drinking water supplies. GLOBE PHOTO BY JOHN BLANDING

## A community coalition is generated from fears

WOBURN — After learning last night that a study has confirmed the long-suspected link between toxic waste and serious health consequences in this suburban city of 37,000, one Woburn woman wondered publicly if she should move.

"If you move out you don't know what you're moving into," responded Donna Robbins, a Woburn resident who lost a child to leukemia that, the study suggests, might have been related to contamination of drinking water in the 1960s and '70s.

"If you move, you may not have the community support that you have here," Robbins added. "Stay here and help us fight it. That's what we need."

The exchange, which took place at a crowded meeting in the auditorium of Trinity Episcopal Church on Main street, exemplifies the mixed feelings that the toxic waste issue has stirred here.

On the one hand, the presence in Woburn of two separate toxic waste problems qualifying for federal Superfund cleanup grants has caused understandable fears about the silent health risks that may threaten residents. At the same time, the community's anxiety has been an energizing force.

In the end, the anxiety was channeled into a unique collaboration with scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health that some believe may be a model for other US communities yearning for answers about the toxic waste

threat.

"Government can't afford to mount a study of this magnitude," commented Prof. Marvin Zelen of the Harvard School of Public Health, one of the academicians who volunteered to help a Woburn community group called For A Cleaner Environment study the problem. "But this effort demonstrates that there may be another approach — to harness the energy of the town."

Zelen and his colleagues stressed last night that the study has left many questions unanswered about the health effects of drinking water contamination emanating from two city wells that were shut down in 1979.

For instance, the industrial solvents known to have contaminated wells G and H in East Woburn have not so far been firmly linked to leukemia or other specific human disorders, and it probably will never be known whether the water earlier contained other toxic compounds, such as arsenic.

Despite the lingering questions, most people who heard the Harvard scientists' complex presentation seemed satisfied — even pleased, in an odd way — to have their anxieties confirmed.

"I feel great for Anne Anderson [a Woburn housewife who launched the community group after her son's leukemia was diagnosed, and Bruce Young [a local Episcopal rector who was a prominent group leader]," said state Rep. Nicholas Paleologos (D-Woburn).

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