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## **Stink from former N.J. Superfund site is worrying neighbors and officials**

Published: Oct. 03, 2020, 5:00 p.m.



The Monroe Township Landfill, a former Superfund site in Monroe Township, New Jersey, on October 1, 2020. (Michael Sol Warren | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com) Michael Sol Warren | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

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By [Michael Sol Warren | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](https://www.nj.com/stories/monroe-landfill-odor/)

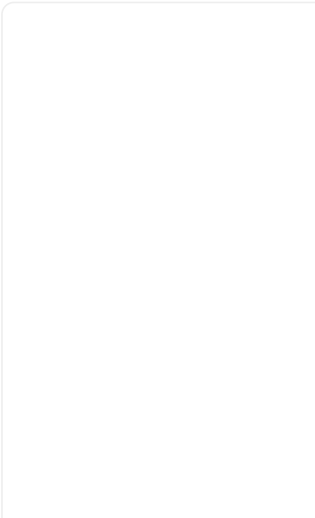
Residents of a quiet Middlesex County suburb have found themselves overwhelmed by a mysterious odor invading their homes.

They claim the scent is like natural gas, but not quite.

“It’s sewer with some perfume in it,” Preston Jackson, a 30-year resident of the affected neighborhood in Monroe Township, said when trying to describe the smell.

Jackson and other residents say the stench has cropped up sporadically in years past. But in recent weeks, the issue has become more frequent, and the odors have stuck around in their homes longer.

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Environmental regulators believe the old landfill in their backyard is likely to blame.

The [Monroe Township Landfill site](#) was once a Superfund site, and considered among the nation's most toxic areas. But the site was deemed remediated in the early '90s, and no problems have been reported since.

Now, with residents concerned about potential health risks and their quality of life, local and federal officials are working to figure out the source of the problem and find a permanent solution.

"This investigation is being conducted as an emergency operation," Monroe Township Mayor Gerald Tamburro told residents at a public meeting on Thursday night.

## **Mystery gas stirs concern**

Multiple residents who spoke at Thursday's meeting expressed concerns that the smells might carry health risks, and expressed frustration with the lack of certainty about what specific gasses are seeping into their homes.

David Cugini, who has lived near the landfill for five years, told officials he felt like a bad parent for keeping his children — who are learning remotely due to [the coronavirus](#) — at home with the smell.

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Jackson's children are adults now, but he said he still sympathizes with his neighbor's worries.

"It's a nuisance at this point to me because I'm somewhat older, my kids are out of the house at this stage in the game," Jackson said. "But if I had younger kids, it would be a much greater concern."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it has not yet been able to test the actual gasses that are causing the odors. But the agency has tested the leachate which is channeled out of the landfill and into the public sewer system, and found the liquid is not likely to produce harmful gasses.

Leachate is the term used to describe liquids trapped in landfills that slowly seep out over time.

"EPA does not believe the potential air emissions of the leachate flowing through the sewer system would have caused an unacceptable human health risk during these odor incidents," said Elias Rodriguez, an EPA spokesman.

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It's believed that the smell is seeping up from that leachate in the sewer system, which that runs under the neighborhood's streets, and entering homes through plumbing. As part of the remediation process for the site, leachate from the landfill has for decades been collected and channeled into the sewer, so it can be carried to the Middlesex County Utilities Authority plant in Sayreville for treatment.

## Persistent stink

The natural gas-like odors have for years been a sporadic occurrence in Inwood Estates, the affected neighborhood near the site. Cugini said he's had PSE&G come to his home multiple times to inspect for gas leaks when the smells have come over the years, but the utility never found an issue.

Jackson noted that when the problem has happened in the past, the odors would dissipate after a few hours. But recently, as the smell has become more frequent, it's also gotten stronger and become longer-lasting.

"Just over the course of the last couple of months, it's just gotten worse," Jackson said.

The recent uptick in smells began Aug. 4, according to John Osolin, an EPA project manager who spoke at the Thursday meeting. The next day, he said, an inspection of the landfill by Republic Services — which manages the site — showed no issue.

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That initial occurrence led to a public meeting Aug. 13, held by the EPA and township officials, where residents were asked to immediately report the odor if it came back.

“We had given them our phone numbers and said if you smell an unusual smell after that August incident, call us. We want to be more aware of it and want to be able to, you know, witness it,” Alan Weinberg, Monroe’s business administrator, told NJ Advance Media “[That happened on Sept. 16.](#)”

That’s when the town received more complaints of the smell returning to residents homes. This time, the odor persisted into the following day. Republic responded by lowering the leachate pump rates, Osolin said, which seemed to help.

[But the smell, and the complaints, returned on Sept. 23](#) and again persisted into the next day. [That time, Osolin said, Republic decided to shut the leachate pumps off.](#)

The recent issues are a disappointing turn for a site that has been a sort of success story for the national Superfund program.

The 86-acre landfill is owned by Monroe Township, and was operated by the town between 1955 and 1968, according to the EPA. The town then leased the landfill to Princeton Disposal Service, which operated the site until 1972. [Princeton Disposal was then purchased by Browning-Ferris Industries of South Jersey, which continued to lease and operate the landfill until 1978.](#)

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That's the year that leachate began leaking from the landfill and onto Lani Street. A state investigation found that even though only household and municipal waste was delivered to the landfill, the area's soil and groundwater had become contaminated with hazardous chemicals. It is known that hydrochloric acid was dumped at the site, according to the EPA.

In the wake of the spill, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection ordered the landfill closed in 1979. The state then ordered the township to install a system to collect the leachate on site.

The landfill was placed on the Superfund list in 1983, the year that the federal program was launched. Superfund sites are regarded as some of the most polluted areas in the nation, and inclusion on the list makes a site eligible for federal funding and attention.

"At the time, EPA and NJDEP were uncertain whether landfill wastes had migrated from the landfill either through overland flow, or in the groundwater," Rodriguez said.

The EPA ordered further improvements to deal with the leachate, including the creation of the system that channels the problem liquid into the sewer system, so it could be treated at the Sayreville plant.

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By the early '90s, the EPA had determined that the measures taken were effective at keeping the pollution contained and neutralizing risk to surrounding properties. In 1994, the Monroe Township Landfill site was deleted from the Superfund list. Republic which bought Browning-Ferris Industries in 2008, and became responsible for managing the site.

Every five years, the EPA conducts a review of the site. The most recent review was conducted last year and published in November. It found no issues at the landfill.

"The five year review showed that the landfill was working as designed," Rodriguez said. "At that time there were no complaints from the residents that were identified to EPA by either the town or town engineers."

The leachate pumps will remain shut down indefinitely, Osolin said, at least until the investigation into the new, intense odors is complete.

For now, leachate is being collected in an underground storage tank at the landfill. When that tank fills up, Republic will pump the smelly liquid into trucks for delivery to treatment facility in Pennsylvania.

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Cugini said he left Thursday's meeting with a feeling that the situation is being taken seriously.

"I'm encouraged by our meeting today, and we'll see what the follow-up is, but we're off to a promising start," he said.

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