

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwood-mayor-apr22,0,7318486.story>

Crestwood well water: Mayor tells residents, 'Your drinking water is safe'

Chicago Tribune reported that tainted well had been used for 2 decades

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune reporter April 22, 2009

In response to a Tribune investigation that revealed [Crestwood](#)'s secret use of a well polluted with cancer-causing chemicals, Mayor Robert Stranczek has hired a public relations firm and prepared to send letters to every village resident and business.

In the two-page letter, obtained Tuesday by the Tribune, Stranczek does not deny the village drew water from the well for more than two decades. But he stresses that the water has not been used since 2007, when the Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) found cancer-causing vinyl chloride in the water.

"First of all, I can tell you that your drinking water is safe," wrote Stranczek, appointed mayor in 2007 after his father, Chester, retired. "The leaders of this community, including my father who served four decades as mayor, have always put the safety and security of our residents first."

Stranczek said the well was used to supplement purchases of treated Lake Michigan water when demand was high. The water was treated with chlorine, which kills bacteria but doesn't affect chemical contaminants.

"Despite the issues with the well," he wrote, "there is no evidence that the drinking water that flowed from our kitchen taps contained any hazardous substances beyond what the law allows."

State officials have argued that health risks were minimal because the well water was diluted with lake water in the village's distribution system. But [the U.S.](#) EPA says there is no safe level of exposure to vinyl chloride.

The Illinois EPA found vinyl chloride in the well at levels up to 5.41 parts per billion, more than twice the legal limit. The state also told Crestwood in 1986 that tests had found the well was tainted.

Stranczek said the village is cooperating with investigations by state officials.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/health/chi-crestwood-water-raid-30-apr30,0,1680021.story>

EPA seizes Crestwood files Raid comes after tainted-well report

By Michael Hawthorne and Carmen Greco Jr April 30, 2009

Federal agents raided government offices in south suburban [Crestwood](#) on Wednesday, less than two weeks after a Tribune investigation revealed the village had secretly pumped drinking water from a polluted well for more than two decades.

Acting on a search warrant obtained by [U.S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald](#)'s office, investigators from [the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) spent most of the day collecting records from Crestwood Village Hall, the public works department and the Police Department. They carted away several boxes

of documents and took computers for further review.

The involvement of federal prosecutors signals a significant turn in the case. Most violations of environmental laws are handled in civil court, and criminal pollution investigations typically are directed at corporations and individuals, not municipalities.

Agents on the scene in Crestwood wouldn't say much, nor would Fitzgerald's office. But the raid closely followed the Tribune's April 19 report that village residents for years drank water contaminated with chemicals linked to cancer, liver damage and other ailments.

"We're looking for evidence of any environmental crimes we can find," said Randall Ashe, special agent in charge of the [EPA's](#) Midwest criminal office.

Fifteen EPA investigators served a warrant at Village Hall about 9 a.m., joined by uniformed Illinois State Police and agents from the Coast Guard.

As federal agents continued to work inside the hall, Mayor Robert Stranczek issued a one-sentence statement from the front steps: "Right now our drinking water is 100 percent safe and the village doesn't believe there was anything wrong with it prior to this."

Records obtained by the Tribune show that although Crestwood officials have told residents all their tap water was treated Lake Michigan water bought from neighboring [Alsip](#), they were still taking a portion of the village's water supply from the polluted well.

The well was finally shut in late 2007, when the Illinois EPA tested the water for the first time since 1986. State officials found the well was contaminated with two chemicals, dichloroethylene and vinyl chloride, which is so toxic the U.S. EPA says there is no safe level of exposure.

In an interview Friday with the Tribune, Stranczek acknowledged he has known about the use of the well since at least 1997, when he became a village trustee. He was appointed mayor in 2007 when his father, Chester, retired after leading the village for nearly four decades.

Village officials, as well as the state EPA, knew the well was contaminated at least as early as 1986, records show. They also heard about the contamination in 1998, when village officials were on hand as contractors tested the well and found dichloroethylene in the water.

The contractors were investigating pollution from a dry cleaner less than 300 feet from the well, according to a letter found in state files. A dry-cleaning solvent that had leached into the ground, perchloroethylene, breaks down into dichloroethylene and vinyl chloride.

Federal and state officials vowed to take swift action after the Tribune first reported about the polluted well. [Gov. Pat Quinn](#) and Illinois Atty. Gen. [Lisa Madigan](#) have proposed tougher rules for municipal water systems and for state agencies, which failed to notify Crestwood residents that their water was contaminated.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Chicago), who represents Crestwood, has urged the U.S. EPA and the Justice Department to investigate.

Wednesday's raid was led by the Chicago office of the [EPA's criminal division](#), a little-known group that agency officials in Washington have recently promoted more aggressively. The EPA even created a [most-wanted list of environmental scofflaws](#), most accused of illegal dumping or importing banned chemicals.

One of the division's most recent convictions came in an unrelated case from Crestwood. James Spain, owner of the cleaning-products maker Crown Chemicals, was sentenced Feb. 4 to one year of home

confinement and fined \$30,000 after pleading guilty to charges that his company illegally dumped toxic chemicals into local sewers.

In October, Ashe and his team raided the offices of the [Gary](#) Sanitary District in Northwest Indiana. Most of the agency's other criminal cases involve businesses or individual polluters.

Left unanswered in Crestwood is whether the contaminated water might have contributed to any diseases or illnesses. Officials have not tried to answer that difficult question, which has been on the minds of many current and former residents.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwood-follow-21-apr21,0,2990777.story>

Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn demands answers from state EPA on Crestwood's 2-decade use of tainted well

Governor championed disclosure law and he wants to know why the public wasn't notified of contamination By Michael Hawthorne Tribune reporter April 21, 2009

[Gov. Pat Quinn](#) is demanding answers from the Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) about why residents of south suburban [Crestwood](#) weren't notified that the village had pumped drinking water contaminated with cancer-causing chemicals for more than two decades.

In response to a Tribune investigation that revealed the village's secret use of a polluted well, Quinn on Monday directed his senior staff to conduct a thorough review of the EPA's actions in Crestwood. Among other things, the governor wants to know why the agency didn't invoke a 2005 law requiring the state to issue a notification when residents could be exposed to soil or groundwater pollution.

Quinn championed the right-to-know law while he was lieutenant governor.

What happened in Crestwood highlights an apparent weakness in the law. When public water supplies are affected, state environmental regulators are required to only notify municipal officials and not the residents.

But village officials are the ones responsible for deciding to use the well, even though they had been notified at least 22 years ago that dangerous chemicals related to a dry-cleaning solvent got into the water, records show.

"The governor is a longtime proponent in notification and continues to believe very strongly in that law," Quinn spokesman Bob Reed told the Tribune. "We are keeping an open mind about changing any rules or closing any loopholes in the law."

Asked about the lack of public notification, EPA officials first said the well was contaminated too long ago to trigger the law's requirements. Later they said it was because pollutants in Crestwood's tap water didn't violate legal limits.

In a statement released Monday, Illinois EPA Director Doug Scott said "the public's health never was at risk" because the well water was diluted with treated Lake Michigan water. But one of the chemicals found in Crestwood's well, vinyl chloride, is so toxic that [the U.S.](#) EPA says there is no safe level of exposure.

Crestwood told state regulators in 1986 that the village would get all of its tap water from Lake

Michigan and would use the well only in an emergency. But records show Crestwood routinely kept drawing well water, relying on it for up to 20 percent of the village's supply some months.

The well was finally shut off in December 2007, after the EPA tested the water for the first time in more than two decades. The agency found not only that the well still was contaminated but that Crestwood had been piping the water, untreated, to residents.

The state EPA has cited Crestwood twice for violating environmental laws, once for using the contaminated well and again for repeatedly telling residents that all of their tap water was treated lake water.

Both the EPA and Illinois Atty. Gen. [Lisa Madigan](#)'s office continue to investigate, and the U.S. EPA said Monday it would conduct its own inquiry.

State officials think the source of contamination is a dry cleaner in a strip mall less than 300 feet from Crestwood's well. The well water is polluted with vinyl chloride and another chemical related to perchloroethylene, a dry-cleaning solvent linked to cancer, liver damage and neurological problems.

It is unknown if the water contributed to any health problems in Crestwood. Nobody has tried to answer that difficult question, though many residents are demanding a closer look.

"There appears to be low levels of exposure here," said Dr. Peter Orris, chief of environmental and occupational medicine at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#) Medical Center. "That said, every additional carcinogenic exposure adds some degree of risk."

Before the Tribune story in Sunday's editions, the only public hint that something might be wrong with Crestwood's water was an Aug. 13 news release from the Illinois Department of Public Health. In the release, the agency warns that vinyl chloride might have contaminated private wells in the area, but it does not mention that village officials for years been adding contaminated water to the municipal water supply.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), who represents Crestwood, sent a letter Monday to U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson demanding a federal investigation. "This was a deceitful act and someone must be held accountable," Rush said in a statement.

Crestwood officials have not responded to repeated inquiries from the Tribune. On Saturday, former Mayor Chester Stranczek told the Southtown Star he couldn't comment.

"I have to wait for the lawyers," said Stranczek, who was mayor from 1969 to 2007, when he stepped down and was replaced by his son, Robert. "If there is a lawsuit, our lawyers will be very unhappy if I talk about it."

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-chemical-041909,0,2310066.story>

U.S. reviewing partial ban of cleaning chemical

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune staff reporter April 19, 2009

The Obama administration is mulling whether to force dry cleaners to phase out the cancer-causing chemical that soaked into the soil behind a [Crestwood](#) business and is still used in tens of thousands of shops nationwide.

Health experts have known for years about the hazards posed by perchloroethylene, a potent solvent that has been linked to cancer, liver damage and neurological problems. But lobbyists representing dry cleaners have fiercely resisted a ban. This month [the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) asked the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit to postpone hearing a legal challenge of the federal government's latest rules restricting use of the chemical. The [EPA](#) said it wanted to reconsider the rules on policy and legal grounds.

The case involves a 2006 decision by the Bush administration to order dry cleaners in residential buildings to stop using perchloroethylene by 2020. Environmental groups challenged the decision because it didn't apply to thousands of other cleaners in non-residential buildings.

Exposure to the chemical, also known as PCE or perc, has been linked to health problems among workers. It also has contaminated groundwater in thousands of sites around the nation, usually from improper disposal.

As the health risks became better known, federal rules have gotten tougher and dry cleaners have gradually reduced their use of PCE. The Drycleaning & Laundry Institute, an industry trade group, has pushed for an extended phaseout, citing the cost of new equipment.

A former owner of Playfield Cleaners in Crestwood improperly disposed of PCE in the 1980s; byproducts of the chemical seeped into a nearby municipal well, according to state records.

[John Kelly](#), whose family has owned the cleaners for the past five years, said the shop used about 12 gallons of PCE in 2008. "We're trying to phase it out," he said.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwood-water-story,0,1734272.story>

Crestwood officials cut corners and supplied residents with tainted water for 2 decades

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune staff reporter April 19, 2009

Like every town across the nation, south suburban [Crestwood](#) tucks a notice into utility bills each summer reassuring residents their drinking water is safe. Village leaders also trumpet the claim in their monthly newsletter, while boasting they offer the cheapest water rates in Cook County.

But those pronouncements hide a troubling reality: For more than two decades, the 11,000 or so residents in this working-class community unknowingly drank tap water contaminated with toxic chemicals linked to cancer and other health problems, a Tribune investigation found. As village officials were building a national reputation for pinching pennies, and sending out fliers proclaiming Crestwood water was "Good to taste but not to waste!," state and village records obtained by the newspaper show they secretly were drawing water from a contaminated well, apparently to save money.

Officials kept using the well even though state environmental officials told them at least 22 years ago that dangerous chemicals related to a dry-cleaning solvent had oozed into the water, records show.

The village avoided scrutiny by telling state regulators in 1986 that they would get all of their tap water from Lake Michigan, and would use the well only in an emergency. But records show Crestwood kept drawing well water on a routine basis -- relying on it for up to 20 percent of the

village's water supply some months.

The well wasn't shut off for good until December 2007, after the Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) tested the water for the first time in more than 20 years. The agency found not only that the well was still contaminated but that Crestwood had been piping the water, untreated, to residents.

Since then, the EPA has cited Crestwood twice for violating environmental laws, yet has failed to notify people who drank the well water for years. The agency continues to investigate, and Illinois Atty. Gen. [Lisa Madigan](#)'s office also is looking into the matter.

The most likely source of the contamination is a dry cleaners in a strip mall less than 300 feet from Crestwood's well, just across a narrow, tree-lined creek that drains into the nearby Cal-Sag Channel. The well water is polluted with two chemicals related to perchloroethylene, or PCE, a dry-cleaning solvent linked to cancer, liver damage and neurological problems.

Thousands of other sites are contaminated with the same chemicals, usually from illegal dumping or improper disposal. But there are few if any other documented cases when public officials knew about the problem and looked the other way.

Crestwood's actions began to come to light after a mother refused to stop asking questions about why her teenage son suffered leukemia as a toddler. One of her numerous public-records requests turned up a report outlining some of what the EPA knew about the contaminated well, and she prodded state investigators to dig deeper into the case. The Tribune discovered more details through interviews and public-records requests.

"I'm so sad and angry and disappointed about this," said Tricia Krause, who moved to Crestwood in 1987 and gave birth to three children while living there for nearly nine years. "There is no excuse for what they did to all of us."

It is unknown if the water contributed to any health problems in Crestwood, including the cancer diagnosed in Krause's son, Matthew, now 19 and healthy. State officials haven't tried to answer that difficult question but say the risks were minimal because the well water was heavily diluted with treated lake water.

However, it generally isn't acceptable to rely on dilution to ensure water is safe to drink. One of the chemicals found in Crestwood's well, vinyl chloride, is so toxic that [the U.S.](#) EPA says there is no safe level of exposure.

"We know these things are carcinogens, and their presence in our drinking water doesn't do us any good," said David Ozonoff, a Boston University epidemiologist and PCE expert.

For years Crestwood was best known for its longtime mayor, Chester "Chet" Stranczek, a former minor-league pitcher and trucking company owner who boasted that he ran the village like a business. Stranczek retired in 2007 after nearly four decades in office and was succeeded by his son, Robert.

When the tightfisted Stranczek started rebating property taxes to every homeowner during the mid-1990s, the action was so unusual the National Enquirer declared Crestwood the "best-run town in America."

"I know every inch of Crestwood," Stranczek told the Sun-Times in 1997. "I know every curb, every sidewalk, every stormwater drain. I know all the dikes. I built most of them."

The June 2001 edition of the Crestwood Adviser, a village newsletter, is one of several that touts low water rates. Next to a portrait of Stranczek, it states: "...we can save you a lot of time by saying that

Crestwood water has passed all the tests prescribed by the EPA during the past year. The results were very favorable, and we have safe drinking water."

That same year, records show, the village pumped more than 51 million gallons of contaminated well water to its residents.

Stranczek and village officials did not respond to repeated Tribune attempts to reach them for comment.

Drawing water from the municipal well, housed in a crumbling yellow-brick building under the village water tower off 127th Street, enabled Crestwood officials to cut back on purchases of lake water treated by Chicago and piped to nearby [Alsip](#).

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-durbin-050609,0,6652761.story>

Durbin calls for health study related to well

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune staff reporter

May 6, 2009

As federal authorities conduct a criminal investigation of [Crestwood](#)'s secret use of a polluted well, U.S. Sen. [Dick Durbin](#) is urging government health experts to study whether anyone got sick from drinking the water.

Since the Tribune first revealed that village residents unknowingly drank contaminated water for more than two decades, scores of people have asked if their chronic, low-level exposure to toxic chemicals contributed to any diseases or illnesses. Durbin, the Senate's assistant majority leader, sent a letter this week to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry that nudges federal and state health officials to at least attempt to answer those difficult questions.

The Illinois Democrat cited "the uncertainty surrounding the level and duration of exposure" to Crestwood's contaminated water and noted [the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) "cannot say with certainty that these levels would not cause adverse health effects."

The disease registry, an arm of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), often works with the [EPA](#) and state agencies to assess health threats related to polluted sites. Among other things, registry officials could use a computer model to estimate how much pollution was in Crestwood's well at various points in time. There appears to be little information to guide such a review, though the water was tested for chemical contaminants on at least three occasions in 1986, 1998 and 2007, according to state records obtained by the Tribune.

[Mark Johnson](#), the registry's senior regional representative, said federal and state officials also are considering a review of the state's [cancer](#) database to determine if there have been any unusual cancers or rates of cancer within the village.

Crestwood officials kept drawing water from the well even though the Illinois EPA notified them in 1986 that it was contaminated with a chemical related to perchloroethylene, a dry-cleaning solvent linked to cancer and other health problems. The well wasn't shut down until late 2007, when the EPA tested the well again and found it was still polluted.

One chemical found in the water, vinyl chloride, is so toxic that the U.S. EPA says there is no safe

level of exposure. For years village officials told regulators and residents that all of Crestwood's water came from Lake Michigan. They repeated that message in annual "consumer confidence reports" required under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

Acting on a search warrant obtained by [U.S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald](#)'s office, federal agents raided Crestwood Village Hall last week and carted away documents for a criminal investigation.

Durbin's call for a federal health investigation comes as other members of Congress are accusing the disease registry of consistently underestimating health risks at other polluted sites.

The agency last week withdrew a controversial assessment of contaminated water at Camp Lejeune in [North Carolina](#); for years Marines and their families drank from wells contaminated with high levels of perchloroethylene and related chemicals. Members of Congress also have slammed the agency for downplaying health risks from formaldehyde-soaked particle board in trailers used by victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-suburbs-050609,0,5569646.story>

Suburbs try to allay any water fears

In the wake of Crestwood's woes, officials look to assure residents about the safety of supplies **By Dennis Sullivan Special to the Tribune** **May 6, 2009**

When word spread that the village of [Crestwood](#) had secretly pumped drinking water from a polluted well to residents for more than two decades, other south suburbs took the step of assuring residents that their water supply is safe.

[Tinley Park](#) posted a release on its Web site to allay fears."In light of recent questions regarding the safety of drinking water in another municipality, Tinley Park officials are assuring residents that the Village's water supply is safe and all old wells have been permanently capped since 1977," the release stated.

Worth said, in response to the Crestwood matter, that officials will inform the public of its water treatment processes at its board meeting on Monday.

Many of the south suburbs contacted by the Tribune said that they phased out deep wells years ago and now get their water from Lake Michigan. Some towns that still rely on well water, including [Joliet](#), Lemont and [Park Forest](#), said their water is safe.

Lemont has five wells -- four deep and one shallow -- and softens and treats its water with chlorine at a water treatment plant, said water supervisor Gerald Turrise. He said they test the water regularly and have never received a violation notice from the [EPA](#).

Turrise said that after the Crestwood incident, he was expecting to get a lot of calls from concerned residents, but didn't receive any. He said Lemont tests the water twice a month.

Park Forest also treats water from its wells. The water supply is tested routinely throughout the year and meets or exceeds standards set by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, according to Village Manager Thomas Mick. In accordance with the state EPA, the village sends out an annual

report to inform the public of the testing processes. Joliet, which has 23 deep wells and five shallow wells, closely monitors the shallow wells to ensure that contaminants aren't leaking into the water supply, said Public Utilities Director Jim Eggen.

He said there are no outstanding EPA violations on any of the wells.

In the 1980s, the city was deemed out of compliance with guidelines for the amount of radium allowed in the water supply. They were given 20 years to come into compliance and did so in December 2007 with the construction of a new water treatment facility.

[Orland Park](#) phased out its municipal wells in 1985 when it first started receiving Lake Michigan water from [Oak Lawn](#), which supplies Chicago water to many south suburbs.

"We didn't blend our water," said John Ingram, a utilities supervisor for the village. "Once we went on Lake Michigan water, we did not run any of the well water into the system."

At that time, radon, a naturally occurring, potentially cancer-causing element, was found in many municipal wells. Ingram said the radon scare drove many south suburbs to cap their wells and convert to lake water. He said Orland Park capped more than a dozen wells.

Tinley Park Mayor Ed Zabrocki said his village relied on well water until 1971 or 1972, when it went to Chicago water. "We disconnected the wells but left them operational for two years. We capped them in 1974 and they've been non-operational since then," he said.

In the statement it posted online, the village said well water was never mixed into the lake water.

[Homewood](#) went to lake water in 1983 with all wells capped by 1985, said Public Works Director John Schaefer.

[Oak Forest](#) stopped using wells in 1974 and never mixed well water into its distribution system, said Public Works Director Troy Ishler. "The major issue was water quality because the well water needed softening and had a high iron content," he said.

Worth has never had a deep well, but homes and businesses were served with individual wells before the village buying access to lake water from Chicago in 1968, said Wayne Demonbreun, superintendent of public works.

When lake water was made available, users were mandated to use the lake water for their homes but were free to use the wells for gardening purposes. That arrangement still exists today.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-law-042709,0,79543.story>

State looks to plug hole in pollution law

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune staff reporter

April 27, 2009

Ann Muniz would like to forget the days of drinking bottled water and taking short showers with the windows open. Health officials suggested taking those unusual steps eight years ago when they told Muniz and nearly 750 other homeowners in an unincorporated area near [Downers Grove](#) that their private wells were contaminated with cancer-causing chemicals.

In an ordeal similar to what [Crestwood](#) residents are now experiencing, the state had known years earlier about toxic pollution seeping into the water supply but didn't notify residents at the time. The

lack of action in Muniz's neighborhood prompted the Illinois legislature in 2005 to unanimously approve a right-to-know law that requires state officials to notify people if they live near a polluted site or if their tap water is contaminated.

But as the Tribune reported April 19, the state did not tell Crestwood residents that it had ordered the village to shut off a contaminated well that had been in use for more than 20 years. Now, [Gov. Pat Quinn](#) and legislative leaders are vowing to fix an apparent weakness in the law, which they hailed as a national model four years ago.

"It's very frustrating to know this is still happening," said Muniz, who drove to Springfield three times to tell lawmakers her story. "I know their pain and anger."

When public water supplies are fouled by toxic pollutants, the law requires that municipal officials, not residents, be notified. But village officials already knew their municipal well was contaminated -- state officials had told them so in 1986 -- and continued to use it anyway.

In response to the Tribune's investigation, Quinn and others vowed last week to ensure that state and local officials follow through on the intent of the law. They also are moving to make it a felony to mislead the public about the source of its water.

"You would expect them to tell their constituents what's in the water they're drinking," said Senate President John Cullerton (D-Chicago), who sponsored the right-to-know measure. "If we need to amend the law to make it clear people should be notified, that's what we'll do."

After the law took effect, the Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) posted on its Web site examples of state officials issuing notifications or requiring polluters to do so. Under the heading "right-to-know legislation better informs Illinois citizens," the site notes that early notification can help people "make important decisions that may impact their families' health."

One case the EPA highlighted involved radioactive tritium that had seeped into groundwater near the [Braidwood](#) nuclear power plant in Will County. The Tribune first reported in January 2006 that Exelon Nuclear had bought out a homeowner and offered to compensate others for any loss in home value because of the contamination.

On at least a half-dozen occasions after that, Exelon and state officials sent notices to people living near the plant updating them on plans to clean up the area.

"We moved fairly quickly on that one," said Kurt Neibergall, manager of the EPA's Office of Community Relations. "In many of these cases, we maybe don't have all of the answers, but we can get as much information as possible out there."

Answers were difficult to find for Muniz and her neighbors in unincorporated Downers Grove. After they were told in 2001 that their wells were contaminated with trichloroethylene and perchloroethylene, two industrial solvents linked to cancer, they were advised by state health officials to avoid drinking tap water and to limit bathing in it.

If they needed to take a shower, Muniz said, they were told to open the windows because the chemicals can easily become airborne when aerated.

The neighborhood later was hooked up to treated Lake Michigan water and the wells were capped. But as the saga dragged on, it became clear that state and local officials had known about the contamination in the late 1980s and didn't inform people living nearby.

"They always seemed to be looking for loopholes or excuses for not telling us what's going on," Muniz

said.

When the right-to-know legislation was signed into law in 2005, state officials vowed that what happened to Muniz and her neighbors wouldn't happen again.

In Crestwood, village officials told state regulators in 1986 that they would use only treated Lake Michigan water from neighboring [Alsip](#) and the contaminated well would be turned on only in an emergency. But records show that Crestwood relied on well water for up to 20 percent of the village's water supply for some months.

The well finally was shut off after the EPA tested the water again in 2007 and found it still was contaminated with chemicals related to perchloroethylene. But before the Tribune report, the only public hint of contaminated water in the area was an Aug. 13 news release from the Illinois Department of Public Health warning that private wells in the area might be polluted.

State officials now say they are taking steps to avoid a repeat of what happened in Crestwood.

"We think what these guys did is outrageous," said Doug Scott, director of the state EPA. "It can't be allowed to ever happen again."

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-crackdown-042509-,0,3080401.story>

Crackdown to target tap water

Crestwood report brings quick response from state officials By Michael Hawthorne
Tribune staff reporter April 25, 2009

Illinois officials are taking steps to ensure people aren't drinking contaminated water, including proposing criminal penalties for misleading the public about the source of water flowing from their taps.

In response to a Tribune investigation that revealed south suburban [Crestwood](#) secretly used a polluted well for more than two decades, [Gov. Pat Quinn's](#) administration vowed Friday to enact a handful of changes in state laws and rules. Starting immediately, more than 650 Illinois towns that buy water from other municipalities must routinely test it before pumping it to households. Crestwood had escaped scrutiny by telling state officials they purchased all of their water from neighboring [Alsip](#), which freed the village from conducting its own tests.

Quinn also is urging state lawmakers to make it a felony to make false statements in annual "consumer confidence reports" required under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. Crestwood leaders told residents they were drinking only treated Lake Michigan water, even as village officials used the polluted well for up to 20 percent of the water supply.

Moreover, communities will be required to keep more detailed records of their water purchases. Crestwood had officially placed its well on "emergency backup status," records show, but a handwritten ledger buried in village files detailed how officials continued to draw well water for years, until state officials in late 2007 again found cancer-causing chemicals in the water and ordered Crestwood to shut off the well for good.

State records show Crestwood was informed in 1986 that a chemical related to perchloroethylene, a

dry-cleaning solvent also known as PCE, had leached into the village's well. That same year, village officials told the state they would be getting all of their drinking water from Alsip.

Robert Stranczek, who succeeded his father as mayor in 2007, told the Tribune that village officials are cooperating with state and federal investigators.

Meanwhile, a Crestwood resident sued the village Thursday in Cook County Circuit Court for using the contaminated well. The suit from Joseph Marzano, a 20-year resident, accuses village officials of negligence and acting with "reckless disregard for the safety or welfare" of Crestwood residents.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-mayor-042609-0,2139933.story>

Jeered mayor defends Crestwood water

Stranczek gets an earful at 1st public meeting since disclosure of toxic well

By Gerry Smith Tribune staff reporter

April 26, 2009

[Crestwood](#)'s mayor on Saturday tried to assure his south suburban town its drinking water is safe as an outraged and skeptical standing-room-only crowd shouted him down and demanded to know why local officials secretly used a polluted well for more than two decades.

The contentious hourlong meeting marked the first time Mayor Robert Stranczek fielded questions from residents since a Tribune investigation found Crestwood residents had unknowingly used tap water contaminated with toxic chemicals linked to cancer and other health problems. "We're going to be lab rats for the next 20, 30, 40, 50 years," said Crestwood resident Wendy Brunette, 44, who called on the village to conduct a survey to see if residents were at risk for any long-term health problems.

Stranczek, who often was drowned out by shouts from about 200 residents, said the well has been turned off, taken out of the ground and closed off.

"Here's what I can tell you about our water: Our water has always been safe to drink," Stranczek said. "I can tell you the water is safe today, will be safe tomorrow and will be safe into the future."

Before it was shut off, Crestwood officials kept using the well even though state environmental officials told them at least 22 years ago that dangerous chemicals related to a dry-cleaning solvent were in the water, records show.

The village avoided scrutiny by telling state regulators in 1986 that they would get all of their tap water from Lake Michigan and would use the well only in an emergency. But records show Crestwood kept drawing well water on a routine basis -- relying on it for up to 20 percent of the village's water supply some months.

The well wasn't shut off for good until December 2007, after the Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) tested the water for the first time in more than 20 years.

State records obtained by the Tribune show the village was aware of the contamination on at least one other occasion. In 1998, village officials were present when contractors tested the well while investigating a plume of perchloroethylene, or PCE, that had leached into the ground nearby. The PCE

most likely came from a dry cleaner less than 300 feet from the well. In a letter found in EPA files, the contractors write that village officials told them they still were drawing from the well for a portion of the village's water supply.

On Saturday, Stranczek told residents the village is cooperating with the state EPA and also is working with the agency to do sample testing.

"No one in the village of Crestwood government, past or present, would ever intentionally allow a hazard to threaten our community," Stranczek said.

The amount of water pumped from the well went as high as 20.4 percent from October 1991 to October 1992, and as low as 2.84 percent from January 2006 to September 2007, according to figures the village released at the meeting.

Sitting next to an attorney, Stranczek denied that the well was used to save money.

"If it was a money issue, we would have been running 20, 25, 30 percent well water," the mayor said.

Asked why the village did not inform residents of the tainted well two decades ago, the mayor said "there were no violations" at that time.

Stranczek said the village has established a Web site, villageofcrestwood.org, to update residents as state officials look into the matter.

A few residents sought to defend the mayor and his father, Chester Stranczek, the town's longtime mayor who retired in 2007. Sandy Baricevic said she raised a daughter in Crestwood who is now 40 and "as healthy as she can be." Baricevic also said she had visited the mayor's house over the years and watched them make tea and coffee "from the faucet, just like everyone else."

But many were angry. Some demanded the village cover medical expenses to see if residents have contracted ailments after drinking the well water.

Most just wanted to know why the village continued using the well long after learning it was polluted.

"Why for 22 or 23 years did you still pump vinyl chloride into our homes?" asked resident Bob O'Toole, referring to a chemical found in the well that is so toxic that [the U.S.](#) EPA says there is no safe level of exposure.

And many said Stranczek did not provide satisfactory answers to that question.

After the meeting, the mayor shook hands with a few residents, exited quickly out a back door and was whisked away in a blue SUV.

Later Saturday, U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, whose district includes Crestwood, spoke to about 300 people at a church in neighboring Palos Heights. Rush said he sent a letter to U.S. EPA administrator Lisa Jackson demanding the federal agency come to Crestwood to hold public meetings, investigate the village and test to ensure the drinking water is safe.

Rush called the actions of Crestwood officials "atrocious," "shameful" and "criminal."

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-crestwoodwater-crackdown-042509-,0,3080401.story>

Crackdown to target tap water

Crestwood report brings quick response from state officials
Tribune staff reporter

April 25, 2009

By Michael Hawthorne

Illinois officials are taking steps to ensure people aren't drinking contaminated water, including proposing criminal penalties for misleading the public about the source of water flowing from their taps.

In response to a Tribune investigation that revealed south suburban [Crestwood](#) secretly used a polluted well for more than two decades, [Gov. Pat Quinn's](#) administration vowed Friday to enact a handful of changes in state laws and rules. Starting immediately, more than 650 Illinois towns that buy water from other municipalities must routinely test it before pumping it to households. Crestwood had escaped scrutiny by telling state officials they purchased all of their water from neighboring [Alsip](#), which freed the village from conducting its own tests.

Quinn also is urging state lawmakers to make it a felony to make false statements in annual "consumer confidence reports" required under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. Crestwood leaders told residents they were drinking only treated Lake Michigan water, even as village officials used the polluted well for up to 20 percent of the water supply.

Moreover, communities will be required to keep more detailed records of their water purchases. Crestwood had officially placed its well on "emergency backup status," records show, but a handwritten ledger buried in village files detailed how officials continued to draw well water for years, until state officials in late 2007 again found cancer-causing chemicals in the water and ordered Crestwood to shut off the well for good.

State records show Crestwood was informed in 1986 that a chemical related to perchloroethylene, a dry-cleaning solvent also known as PCE, had leached into the village's well. That same year, village officials told the state they would be getting all of their drinking water from Alsip.

Robert Stranczek, who succeeded his father as mayor in 2007, told the Tribune that village officials are cooperating with state and federal investigators.

Meanwhile, a Crestwood resident sued the village Thursday in Cook County Circuit Court for using the contaminated well. The suit from Joseph Marzano, a 20-year resident, accuses village officials of negligence and acting with "reckless disregard for the safety or welfare" of Crestwood residents.