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Owners of fiber-spewing plant in Summerville hope upgrades will solve problems

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People who live in neighborhoods surrounding Lauscha Fibers on the north side of Summerville have complained about airborne fibers escaping the plant, but plant officials say the white fluff is not a health hazard. Brenda Rindge/staff

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SUMMERVILLE — The fluffy white fibers that have been blanketing parts of Summerville frequently over the last few years are not a health hazard, officials said Thursday.

Residents of the north side of the town, near the Lauscha Fiber International Corp., say the plant's aging and malfunctioning equipment is allowing the airborne fibers to escape, blanketing their houses, cars and yards.

"We see no public health issue," Director of Operations Tom Lord said during a community meeting Thursday. "There is no evidence that exposure to these fibers causes disease."

Lauscha, which produces high-temperature materials for air filters, oil filters and water filters and insulation from glass pellets, has had independent air quality testing by environmental firm GHD since Jan. 5.

But the residents are still concerned.

"They don't find (health issues) for 20, 30 years and then all of a sudden everybody comes down with cancer," said Tom Iorizzo, who lives about 1.5 miles from the plant in Pine Forest Country Club.

Some, like Raychelle Turley said they wear medical masks when they go outside. Others don't go outside at all.

"I want to know if this is affecting my asthma," said Turley, a thyroid cancer survivor who lives in Clemson Terrace. "I should be able to enjoy my house and I'm afraid to go outside."

Lauscha's owner, Unifrax Specialty Fibers, agree that the plant has a problem, Lord said.

"We understand that you are upset," he told angry residents as they spoke over him. "This is not acceptable to you and it's not acceptable to us. We are going to make this right."

Unifrax is investing \$5 million into the plant to fix the problem, he said.

“Looking back, we wish we’d make that upgrade we’re making now back when we bought it,” Lord said.

Buffalo, N.Y.-based Unifrax acquired the plant in 2013, but it has been operating at 105 East Port Lane in Summerville since 1996.

Sporadic complaints to the state Department of Health and Environmental Control about the synthetic fibers date to 2001, but since 2015, there have been nearly 20 complaints, resulting in the manufacturer being issued a warning letter from DHEC.

“We’ve done a number of short-term things, including installing automatic monitoring to try to fix the problem,” Lord said. “The equipment that we have now is operating the best it possibly can while we get these upgrades done.”

The company is waiting for permits from DHEC to install the abatement equipment. Construction on the improvements should be done by July or August.

“We expect that’s going to solve this problem,” he said.

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