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DuPont prepares letters on health monitoring program

by Matt Harvey
ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR

CLARKSBURG — Residents of northern Harrison County likely will begin receiving letters around Feb. 15 explaining what's next on the DuPont Spelter smelter lawsuit settlement.

Claims Administrator Edgar Gentle III has sent a proposed letter to Harrison Circuit Judge Thomas A. Bedell for review and potential approval.

Gentle's correspondence indicates those who successfully register for medical monitoring will receive an initial payment of \$200. That would be true even if they don't agree to be tested over

the next 30 years for exposure to arsenic, cadmium and/or lead.

There could be an additional payment later this year, depending on how many people sign up, Gentle said. The payout comes from \$4 million set aside through the settlement, although close to \$1 million will be used for start-up costs for the medical monitoring program, Gentle indicated Tuesday.

One of the class action lawyers, Clarksburg's Perry Jones, said it was at one time estimated around 8,500 people could be eligible.

He hopes everyone who can participate.

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"I think it's important that community sign up for the monitoring part of the program. If something is wrong, it allows for early detection of the problem," Jones said. "It also helps healthcare providers, should there be a certain trend in types of diseases. They can follow and track those more easily."

The letters also will spell out, among other items: When potential class members are scheduled for public hearings; what proof of residence is required; and some information on the medical

monitoring program.

Gentle acknowledged the medical monitoring is purely preventative; that is, if a condition is found, DuPont didn't agree to pay for treatment.

But, "a lot of times, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," Gentle said.

The testing would be conducted about every two years, he said.

Those with conditions detected would be referred for treatment, Gentle said.

Some have told Gentle they already have medical insurance and see no need for the medical monitoring, Gentle said.

However, he noted the program lasts 30 years, and much could change with health care in that time.

"It seems to me it doesn't hurt to have it, and it might be a great benefit for those who don't have coverage," he said.

Some people may think they already had to sign up for the class action. Not so, Gentle said; only those who actually opted out aren't eligible.

However, those who now don't fill out forms to register for medical monitoring by Aug. 31 would "forever waive" their rights to that benefit, under Gentle's correspondence to Bedell.

Gentle has set aside public meetings mornings and afternoons Feb. 28-March 4 and March 7-11, at the Spelter fire hall, according to Gentle.

"We want the size of each meeting to be big enough to make good use of our resources

for the settlement, but small enough that everyone is heard," he said.

Those who attend also will be asked for input on how they believe the \$34 million set aside for property cleanup best should be spent, Bedell said.

Jones also hopes residents participate fully in the cleanup efforts.

"I think it was the same idea with the cleanup as with medical monitoring: Make the community a safer place to live in," Jones said.

The lawsuit had alleged areas in the northern part of the county were polluted over the years by the smelter that at one time was owned by DuPont and which provided war materials during World War II.