

N.Y. eyes Legionnaires’ regulations

Cuomo, Legislature target cooling towers after outbreak of disease kills 12 in Bronx

JOSEPH SPECTOR
JSPECTOR@ITHACAJOURNAL.COM

ALBANY — Andrew Cuomo said he and the state Legislature will work on new laws and regulations governing cooling towers in New York buildings after an outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease in the Bronx has led to 12 deaths.

It’s has been the largest outbreak of the disease in the city’s history, and there have been at three cases in nearby Rockland County in recent days.

Cuomo said the state needs a standard policy on how to inspect buildings for Legionnaires’ disease, a form of bacteria that can lead to pneumonia especially among the elderly and people with preexisting health conditions.

Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who have been at odds over the response to the outbreak, said Tuesday evening that they would come up with joint regulations and legislation that would mandate maintenance and testing of cooling towers, fines for failure to comply and a statewide registry.

As of Monday after-

noon, there were 113 reported cases of the disease in the Bronx and cooling towers in 18 buildings that have tested positive for the legionella bacteria, state and city officials said. Every cooling tower in the area has been ordered to be disinfected.

“We can’t have this happen again,” Cuomo told reporters Monday afternoon. “We have to have a statewide system, statewide protocols. So if you own a building in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse or Nassau, you have the same protocol.”

Indeed, there appears to be little state oversight of cooling units in hospitals, nursing homes or apartments, except for some recommended guidance. Cuomo urged owners to inspect their buildings, particularly in the summer months when air conditioning is being used.

“If building owners are not going to take it on themselves to do the right thing and take corrective action, then the state will,” Cuomo said.

De Blasio introduced legislation on Monday with City Council Speaker

Melissa Mark-Viverito that would mandate inspections of cooling towers and register them. On Tuesday, the sides agreed to work jointly on statewide measures.

“This legislative action will be the first of its kind for a major American city, as well as the first set of regulations by any state in the union, and it will establish new registration, cleaning and monitoring standards for cooling towers in the fight against Legionnaires’ disease,” de Blasio said in a statement.

Senate Health Committee chairman Kemp Hannon, R-Nassau County, said the chamber would consider ways to better regulate buildings for Legionnaires’ disease. The Legislature doesn’t plan to return to the Capitol until January after its legislative session ended in June.

“Obviously anytime you even have one death, you have to be concerned as to whether the system is working. It’s not working,” Hannon said.

But Hannon said any regulations would need to balance public health concerns with putting an un-



Lawmakers are considering New York’s first regulations for a type of heavy-duty rooftop air conditioning equipment amid suspicions that bacteria-laden mist from these units could be the cause of the deadliest known outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease in the city’s history.

funded mandate on local governments, who could be required to increase inspections and oversight of the buildings.

“There really needs to be a wider look at what’s going on, to see how it’s going and then to make a decision as to who is going to do the type of oversight you need in this state,” he said. “Anytime you change requirements in public health, we always have a debate over who is going to pay for it.”

Dr. Sherlita Amler, the Westchester County health commissioner, said the county investigates cases of Legionnaires’ disease, but outside New York City, there isn’t the concentration of housing that can poise as great as a risk for an outbreak.

“There are sporadic cases,” she said. “I would imagine almost every county has sporadic cases, and a lot of times it’s never related to anything and you never find the source. But when you have multiple cases that have some kind of link, then an investigation ensues.”

On its website, the state Health Department said fewer than 100 cases are reported each year outside New York City, and “most cases occur as single isolated events.”

Assembly Health Committee chairman Richard Gottfried, D-Manhattan, said in a statement that “statewide regulations would be appropriate.”

“But New York state has been well served by a very long tradition that most public health code enforcement is done by local health departments, and an even longer tradition of New York City regulations being made by New York City,” he continued. “Legionnaires’ is unpredictable and being cautious and preemptive is a correct response.”

Follow Joseph Spector on Twitter @gannettalbany.

Cemetery

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students — 14-year-old Julian Perry, 15-year-olds Tommy Do and Joseph Duncan, all of Ithaca, and McLean resident Alexis LaPage, 16 — have cleaned and fixed broken headstones and restored the original order of the cemetery. Using a collection of maps plotting the historical organization of the site, the students helped to reunite scattered stones with the plots where they belonged. The sites and their repairs will be uploaded to namesinstone.com, a nationwide cemetery index.

The teens’ work will be on display from 10 a.m. to noon Wednesday for tours of the site, starting at the University Avenue entrance.

“We can follow the rule of restoration, bringing it to the way (of) its original look — which isn’t in our budget — but we also don’t know what the stone originally looked like,” Ruth said. “We use the method of conservation, only fixing what we see and doing no repairs beyond that, to bring it to a level that’s acceptable.”

The student workers were placed into the six-week program through local youth summer employment programs sponsored by the Ithaca Youth Bureau Youth Employment Service, Workforce NY JobLINK, Cornell Cooperative Extension Rural Youth Services and Challenge Workforce Solutions Summer Employment.

Work Preserve operates year-round and is funded by the City of Ithaca Community Block Grant Program, the Park Foundation and Historic Ithaca.

As the cemetery is a city-owned property, repairs on the site typically fall under the jurisdiction of the Public Works Department. But with no more room to for burials at the cemetery, there is little room to operate financially, leaving the monuments to decay or wait for funding.

“We do cleanups twice a year or so,” Sara Johnson, Work Preserve job training manager at Historic Ithaca, said. “The city can’t afford to pay for a lot of things in the cemetery. When the cemetery

Upcoming events at the cemetery

Wednesday: Work Preserve Cemetery Team Tour, 10 a.m. to noon. Meet at the University Avenue entrance to the cemetery. Call (607) 277-3450 for more information.

Saturday: Friends of the Ithaca City Cemetery Open House, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Explore recently completed preservation work undertaken by Work Preserve students this summer during a tour with their mentor, historic masonry specialist Randy Ruth. Light refreshments provided.

Aug. 29: Back-to-School Clean-Up Event, 9 a.m. to noon. Join students from Cornell’s Historic Preservation Planning Program, the Department of City and Regional Planning and the Department of Landscape Architecture for a day of preservation and pruning. Bring work gloves and water bottles.

Oct. 25-26: Historic Ithaca’s Annual Halloween Graveyard Tour, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Learn about the Ithaca City Cemetery’s evolution from village burying ground to Victorian garden of the dead. Cider and donuts will be served. Cost: \$5 for Friends of Historic Ithaca; \$8 general public. Children under 12 free (discussion of gruesome historic events may not be suitable for younger children). For more information, call (607) 273-6633 or email christine@historichithaca.org.

Oct. 31: The Ithaca City Cemetery Sprint. Registration begins 9 a.m., Race at 11 a.m. Costumes are welcome and prizes will be given. All ages welcome. All proceeds benefit the Friends of Ithaca City Cemetery, an affiliate of Historic Ithaca Inc. Children and families welcome; strollers are not allowed. Children under 3 free. Runners will receive a T-shirt and a coupon good for a free historical tour of the cemetery. For more information, contact Sara Johnson at (607) 277-3450 or sara@historichithaca.org.

was started and expanded by the city, they thought what they created would continue forward, but I

because it’s 16 confined acres, you have nowhere else to go. It’s essentially become a historic landscape in many ways.”

The gravestones and monuments, though not always easy to read, still tell a lot about local history. Iron pins, used to anchor headstones to their bases, are rusted and expanded in the porous rock, cracking open many stones. Limestone and sandstone facades have eroded, fading the text on markers. Granite has been darkened by the elements.

Ruth, who has experience restoring the masonry of many historical sites, works to reverse the decay less by reproducing the sites as they were, but by matching construction materials and methods to the stones, cross-referencing how monuments were repaired in years past with his own knowledge to determine the best method of repair.

“Some of these burial vaults, like the brick Cornell vault (a mausoleum holding the remains of Ezra Cornell’s oldest son, Alonzo B. Cornell), was covered in cement slurry that will actually trap

moisture within the fabric of the masonry,” Ruth said. “It would cause the brickwork to exfoliate and the cement on top will fall off. If you take that and apply it to a smaller marker, the same theories and principles apply.”

He taught these techniques to the youths working beside him, washing markers and mixing mortar—a special lime-based mix imported from Europe — to be used to bond stones.

“It’s a perfect fit for Work Preserve because one of our focuses is on building traditional skills,” O’Malley said. “Masonry work happens to fall in with that. It’s an introduction, but also a great opportunity to work on different types of stones.”

This work experience comes at a critical juncture for the cemetery. Many structures, like the recently damaged Esty mausoleum at the cemetery’s entrance, have run out of money for repairs, leaving some monuments crumbling. But thanks to a small group of supporters, the youths included, there is some hope for the cemetery’s future.

“We’re really lucky in that people are interested in the cemetery and want to volunteer,” Johnson said. “Whether it’s because of the green space or if they’re interested in history and like to maintain the stones as historical records, we’re very fortunate to have people in this community (who) are interested enough to come out.”

But more volunteers are welcome, Johnson said, to flip the script on the connotations of that old plot on the hill.

The groups have collaborated with the community and students from Cornell’s City and Regional Planning Department to clean the space. They’ve been planning and holding events in the cemetery, including an open house set for 11 a.m. Saturday.

“We’re trying to do programming that directs people’s attention to understanding cemeteries in their historical context,” O’Malley said. “We want people to understand where they fit in the trajectory of history.”

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