

A voluntary cleanup: Ameren to demolish former post office

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - The former site of the **Alton Post Office** at 727 Belle St. will be razed by **Ameren Illinois**, who will also be performing a voluntary environmental cleanup of the location.

Previous to being a post office, the site was a manufactured gas plant from 1855-1941. Manufactured gas plants were once marks of a progressive town **Ameren Illinois** **Public Relations Director Brian Bretsch** said. The gas was produced through burning coal in the absence of air and was stored in large cylinders once able to be seen from

blocks away from the site. Those cylinders were located partially above and partially below ground. Citizens of Alton could use that gas for cooking and the city used it to keep streetlights lit. One of the byproducts of that process, however, was coal tar. Some of that coal tar leaked from the subterranean portions of the tanks into the ground below.

"The coal tar is impacted into the ground itself," Bretsch said. "It does not pose a health risk to the general public or the post office employees who lived and worked there. We're voluntarily cleaning the site with the **Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**."

Bretsch said the site does not pose an immediate threat to the public, but said the cleanup is necessary to avoid any future problems. He said the cleanup would ensure the contaminants would not be unearthed through wayward digging, future construction or acts of nature following the cleanup. As it stands, Bretsch said there is "little to no risk to the general public."

"We are voluntarily cleaning up the site," Bretsch said. "We don't want this to ever become a situation in which something may happen."



Besides the Alton site, Bretsch said Ameren Illinois is working on cleaning another former manufactured gas plant in **East St. Louis**. Another former manufactured gas site is located near **St. Elizabeth Hospital in Belleville**.

Demolition preparations for the site will begin on Nov. 30. Bretsch said Ameren Illinois has talked to **Alton Mayor Brant Walker** and other city officials about the process. During the demolition, Bretsch said, residents and commuters near the former post office may experience slight difficulties due to one lane of Belle Street being closed during the actual razing process.

Before the site is razed, contractors from **Ahrens Contracting, Inc.** will do an asbestos abatement of the building's interior. That process will take approximately 12 days, according to a timeline from Ameren Illinois. Soil and groundwater testing along the site's perimeter will follow that process during the week of Dec. 5 - weather permitting.

When the manufactured gas site was originally razed between 1941-1949 after natural gas lines became more practical and efficient, Bretsch said **Union Electric Company** destroyed the site and buried the coal tar beneath between 10-25 feet of clean fill dirt. That covering is why the contaminants are currently impacted below the surface. Soil and groundwater testing will assist in finding the depth and concentrations of the contaminants.

A fence will be constructed by Ahrens Contracting, Inc. around the perimeter of the site. Demolition of the former post office building should begin the week of Dec. 19 - again, weather permitting. Ameren Illinois will work with the **City of Alton** to partially block one lane of Belle Street during that time.

Following the building's demolition, Ameren Illinois will conduct further soil and groundwater sampling in the area and send it to a lab for analysis. When those results are returned, Ameren Illinois will share them with the Illinois EPA. Cleanup of the site may continue for 12-18 months following those results being returned, Bretsch said.

In the interest of transparency and the public good, Bretsch said Ameren Illinois will send fact sheets to residents around the property and alert the city as well. He said Ameren Illinois will also host an open house for the general public to ask questions and voice concerns about the cleanup.

The price of the cleanup is not known or estimated at this time, but Bretsch said he expects it to cost "several millions" of dollars.