

Natives demand answers

POSSIBLE BENZENE EXPOSURE A CONCERN

By **GEORGE MATHEWSON**
The Observer

Sarnia's First Nation residents are demanding answers following a benzene leak at Nova Chemicals that left at least three people feeling ill.

The Aamjiwnaang band office and adjacent resource centre were evacuated Thursday morning after staff noticed a "sweet smell" in the air.

Nova Chemicals reported a benzene leak at its nearby Sarnia site on Tashmoo Avenue that began Wednesday night and lasted about 11 hours.

Officials were told by a Health Canada environmental health officer that air monitors had detected levels as high as 2.5 parts per million, said Stacey Phillips, the band's health director.

The Ontario limit for the cancer-causing hydrocarbon is one part per million over an eight-hour period.

Phillips said at least three people were advised to seek medical attention after experiencing runny eyes, headaches and respiratory difficulty.

Ron Plain, a member of Aamjiwnaang's environment committee, said reserve residents were left in the dark.

"This is far from over," he said. "People in the band office were sent home but children were standing out front waiting for school buses," he said.

"The protocols weren't fol-

lowed. We have (warning) sirens here, why weren't they used?"

John Thompson, Nova's environment manager, said this morning monitors did record a single benzene reading of 2.5 ppm on Churchill Road, at the reserve boundary, and another of 1.8 ppm on the Aamjiwnaang ball diamond.

Testing at the band office found only traces of benzene at levels undetectable to the nose, Thompson said.

The "sweet smell" noticed was probably from other industrial emissions, he said.

"As a result of the monitoring that was conducted, there are no issues associated with exposure to benzene to the residents of the community, at the levels we've observed."

Thompson said the bulk of the release occurred between 8 p.m. and midnight, when southerly winds carried the vapour toward Sarnia. The direction switched to the north around midnight, placing the reserve in the downwind stream.

It is not known how much material entered the atmosphere.

But by midnight, the leaking vessel had been depressurized and only "trace amounts" of benzene continued to escape until 11:20 a.m. Thursday, Thompson said.

Aamjiwnaang became an international news story last month after the American science journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* published a study documenting a decline in male births since the early 1990s.

Researchers suspect the change in sex ratios is linked to exposure to chemicals from surrounding industries.



NORA PENHALE The Observer

Ron Plain, an Aamjiwnaang environment committee member, and Ada Lockridge, band councillor, look over chemical data sheets Thursday. Reserve residents say they were exposed to benzene following a release at Nova Chemicals.