

October 31, 2004

YOUR HOME

## How to Abandon an Underground Tank

By JAY ROMANO

**M**ANY homeowners who have a fuel storage tank buried outside would like nothing better than to yank the tank out of the ground and replace it with nice, clean, trouble-free dirt.

After all, environmental experts say, it's generally not a matter of whether an underground tank will develop a leak, but when.

But while removing a 550-gallon steel bubble from its grave is often impractical — and sometimes impossible — it is usually feasible to embalm the behemoth where it lies.

"Underground tanks can be a major issue for property owners," said Douglas Wasser, a Manhattan real estate lawyer.

Mr. Wasser explained that since responsibility for a leaking underground fuel storage tank generally lies with the current owner — even if the leak occurred on a former owner's watch — it is critical for buyers to determine whether a tank is buried outside and, if so, what its status is.

Generally, he said, underground tanks fall into four categories: those being used to store heating oil; those formerly used to store oil that were shut down properly; those formerly used that were shut down improperly. And the fourth?

"You could have an old tank sitting out there that even the current owner is not aware of," Mr. Wasser said. For that reason, he said, anyone buying a home should determine whether an underground tank is present.

Warren Cronacher, owner of Tauscher Cronacher Professional Engineers in Rockville Centre, N.Y., said that a home inspector can usually determine whether an underground tank has ever been used on a site. One indication, Mr. Cronacher said, is a filler or vent pipe sticking out of the ground or a foundation wall. But even if such devices have been removed, he said, "you might see copper lines coming through the wall behind the furnace or boiler."

Even if no such clues exist, it is usually possible to find a buried underground tank that even the current owner may not know is there. "Companies can use sound waves to determine where an underground tank is buried," he said, referring to equipment that works like a metal detector to pinpoint a buried object.

If it is determined that an underground tank is present, local law dictates what can be done.

Mr. Cronacher said the general rule is that a tank not being used should either be removed or properly abandoned. Generally, he said, the most practical strategy is abandonment.

Dwayne Monaco, an owner of Northeast Environmental in Mamaroneck, N.Y., said that properly abandoning an underground tank involves several steps. The first, he said, is to make sure the tank is empty and, if not, pump out any remaining oil. "Then you excavate down to the top of the tank, cut it open and get a technician inside the tank to clean it out."

The technician inspects the tank for leaks, which if present could require removal of the tank and any contaminated soil. If no leaks are found, the tank can be filled with an inert material. "You can fill it with either sand, foam, or concrete slurry, and then backfill the hole," Mr. Monaco said, adding that in some cases, the tank can be abandoned without excavation by injecting the material through the filler tube.

The contractor should provide the owner with a document certifying that the tank has been properly abandoned. A residential tank removal or abandonment in the New York area, he said, costs about \$1,500. But removal with remediation of contaminated soil, Mr. Monaco said, can cost tens of thousands of dollars.