

Downtown Albany buildings re-opened

Radioactive material forced evacuation of county courthouse buildings along Columbia Street but those evacuated to a church probably got a higher dose of radiation than from the event.

Times Union
December 19, 2006

The Albany County Courthouse and other buildings along Columbia Street were reopened just before 5 p.m. after a state Health Department inspection cleared any fears that a significant radioactive leak had occurred.

Workers and members of the public streamed from the Albany County Judicial Center, the state Court of Appeals, City Hall and homes and businesses in the immediate vicinity during an evacuation around 3 p.m.

County sheriffs deputies and Albany police directed traffic in the logjam while fire fighters readied hoses at hydrants near the affected buildings.

A backhoe from CME Contractors, which is working on a renovation of the historic Eagle Street court facility, ran over a compaction meter earlier in the afternoon, said Det. James Miller, a spokesman for the Albany Department of Public Safety.

The device, which works like an x-ray machine, was being used to measure the density of soil at the construction site. While the box that contains radioactive isotopes was not damaged in the accident, it did release a small amount of radiation, Miller said.

“There was no danger at any time,” Miller said. “No health risk at all. Everything was done as a precaution.”

By 4:15 p.m., officials had determined the leak was small and were awaiting the go-ahead from health officials to declare the area safe. Albany County Sheriff James Campbell said radioactive readings around the piece of equipment were low.

The decision to evacuate the buildings caused confusion at first. Scores of office workers -- after standing in clusters outside St. Mary's Catholic Church in the cold -- were told they could not go to their vehicles if they'd parked inside the affected area.

Some sat out the cold in their vehicles, even though they were blocked by fire apparatus.

Workmen were working on the north side of the courthouse complex when the mishap occurred.