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CANTON TO INSPECT BUILDING OFFICIALS DENY POLITICS PLAYING ROLE IN KEEPING STATE OFFICES DOWNTOWN

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By George W. Davis, Beacon Journal staff writer

Illustration: MAP: Beacon Journal map showing the location of the state office building

The Canton Health Department is to reinvestigate claims by some state agency employees that the downtown office building in which they work may be "sick" and causing them to be sick as well.

Meanwhile, city, state and federal officials denied the accusation of a woman who says she works in the building and that politics are involved to keep the offices downtown.

That worker and another who complained Wednesday said anonymity was necessary to protect their jobs.

Robert E. Pattison, the city's health commissioner, said staff members are working with supervisors and Tri-State Realty, the building's owner, to get into the basement and other secured areas as early as today to re-evaluate health conditions.

He said inspectors would take samples of mold -- and anything else they might find -- to help determine whether conditions have changed since an inspection two years ago found no problems.

The offices are in the three-story former Stern & Mann department store at the northwest corner of Cleveland Avenue Northwest and Tuscarawas Street West.

The state has nearly 100 workers in the Department of Human Services, Bureau of Rehabilitative Services and the Rehabilitative Services for the Visually Impaired on the first two floors. Nobody is working in the basement, but Family Services Inc. is on the third floor.

Agency authorities already have said they are working to move Rehabilitative Services personnel to another downtown Canton location within three to four months. Human Services also is looking for another location, a representative confirmed Wednesday.

The worker said she saw mushrooms growing from damp carpet in the basement more than a year ago. After that, the basement was closed off and workers were moved. The potentially deadly stachybotrys mold and other fungi were found in the basement a year ago, according to a federal inspection report that surfaced last month.

The worker also says she objects to the location of the building because it is unsafe for workers. Some, she said, have been approached for sex as though they were prostitutes.

Others, she said, have been followed to their cars and that at least one worker had been threatened at knifepoint and another arriving for work had tripped over a person sleeping in the doorway.

Canton police said they couldn't look up specific reports without a name or approximate date but couldn't recall any such incidents being reported.

Saying she was speaking for several co-workers, the woman asserted that some were questioning possible political connections involving Mayor Richard D. Watkins, U.S. Rep. Ralph Regula, R-Navarre, and state agency administrators to keep the workers downtown.

They questioned, too, whether such a connection had anything to do with a federal agency microbiological analysis of the building in March 1997 that didn't surface until last month.

"We want to be in Belden Village because we'd feel safer there," the woman said.

If workers were to move to the Belden Village area of Jackson and Plain townships, they would not have to pay Canton's 2 percent income tax unless they lived in the city. They also could save hundreds of dollars in parking fees by moving from the downtown.

An angered Watkins challenged the woman's accusations. "I'll meet with them, I'll talk to them, but I won't address any claims without meeting with them in person. As far as tripping over people in doorways, that's bull. And anybody being challenged at knifepoint, tell me about it.

"I don't put anything under the rug. And I'm not going to sit here and let some unnamed person make allegations concerning the city that they won't substantiate to me in person."

Regula, like Watkins, denied any "political connection" for keeping the offices downtown.

A Regula spokesman said that "neither the district nor the Washington offices have been contacted by the city of Canton, Tri-State Realty, the Bureau of

Rehabilitative Services or the employees. Had the employees contacted Mr. Regula, he certainly would have made an inquiry on their behalf."

Robert L. Rabe, Rehabilitation Services Commission administrator in Columbus, termed the latest allegations "ridiculous."

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