

INSPECTIONS

KEEP DRY CLEANERS CLEAN

Qualifications

Inspectors must be professional engineers, registered architects or certified industrial hygienists. These inspectors must follow their professional codes of ethics.

Chemical issues force cleaners to keep an open eye

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Cruz Hernandez hadn't owned Erie Cleaners in Blauvelt very long when an inspector visited and slapped him with a violation that cost him \$500.

"The annual inspection was overdue because the previous owner hadn't scheduled one," said Hernandez, a Queens resident who bought the shop at 135 E. Erie St. in 2013.

Erie Cleaners was one of seven dry cleaners in the Lower Hudson Valley fined in 2014 by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which regulates dry cleaners that use perchloroethylene solvent (or perc) to clean clothes. The fines were for violations ranging from a broken ventilation fan to poor record keeping and a missing leak detector.

The biggest fines in the region last year were \$1,500, and they were paid by Calco Cleaners in Nanuet and OK Cleaners in Bedford Hills. The Journal News obtained data on assessed fines and copies of viola-

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Perchloroethylene

The DEC regulates perc-based dry cleaners because perc — a clear, colorless liquid that is distinguished by its sharp, sweet odor — is considered a hazardous chemical that requires special handling.

Health risks

People exposed to high levels of perc may experience dizziness, fatigue, headaches and irritation of the skin, lungs and mucous membranes. Long-term exposure has been shown to cause kidney and liver damage.

Inside

What makes a dry cleaner green? Some offer alternatives to perchloroethylene, a solvent considered toxic. **4A**





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Lizeth Cleaners at 295A North Main St. on Feb. 19, 2015. The business paid a \$1,000 fine last year for an inoperative ventilation fan that broke the day an inspector arrived.

\$1,500 FINE



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OK Cleaners at 723 N. Bedford Road in Bedford Hills on Feb. 18, 2015. The state Department of Environmental Conservation fined OK Cleaners \$1,500 in 2014 for air pollution law violations.

\$450 FINE



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Valley Cottage Cleaners at 485 Kings Highway on Feb. 19, 2015. The business paid a \$450 fine last year for violating state air pollution laws.

Cleaners

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tion and warning notices from the DEC through a Freedom of Information Law request.

Calco Cleaners' violation notice included outdated leak inspection records, a missing leak detector and improperly stored hazardous waste. The store at 345 Route 304 is no longer in business.

The DEC didn't release a violation notice for OK Cleaners, and its owner did not respond to a request for comment.

The DEC regulates perc-based dry cleaners because perc — a clear, colorless liquid that is distinguished by its sharp, sweet odor — is considered a hazardous chemical that requires special handling. State laws are written to minimize the public's and dry cleaning employees' exposure to perc vapors.

People exposed to high levels of perc may experience dizziness, fatigue, headaches and irritation of the skin, lungs and mucous membranes. Long-term exposure has been shown to cause kidney and liver damage. Studies have also linked high levels of perc to elevated risks of certain cancers, according to the fact sheet on perc exposure on the website of the state Department of Health.

Those most at risk of harmful health effects from perc are dry-cleaning employees and people who live near dry cleaners, which, in the Lower Hudson Valley, can be found in many towns and villages on the ground floor of apartment buildings. As of mid-2006, the federal Environmental Protection Agency banned the installation of perc dry-cleaning machines in residential buildings.

There are about 2,000 perc-based dry cleaners in New York, mostly in the New York City metro area. In the Lower Hudson Valley, Westchester County has the most, with 102 dry cleaners that use perc, followed by 49 in Rockland County and seven in Putnam County.

The mishandling of perc by dry cleaners can lead to soil and water contamination. Last year, the DEC oversaw a cleanup at the Aristocrat Cleaners at 212-218 E. Hartsdale Ave. in Hartsdale to remove various dry-cleaning solvents from the soil for commercial purposes, but there is still residual contamination there that is being monitored.

Dry-cleaner owners are required to pay for and schedule their own inspections by DEC-registered inspectors who are considered independent third parties.

Manuel Juca of Lizeth Cleaners at 295A N. Main St. in Spring Valley said that his ventilation fan broke down on a hot day and then his inspector arrived.

"I explained the problem and told her it had happened that day and my mechanic was on vacation. The inspector said 'Don't worry' and I was surprised that she fined me (\$1,000)," said Juca, of West Nyack.

The independent inspectors in the Lower Hudson Valley report to the DEC's Region 3, which has nine full-time staffers who manage air-pollution activities, including enforcement and permits.

In an email, DEC spokesman Peter Constantakes wrote that the inspectors must be professional engineers, registered architects or certified industrial hygienists. Constantakes also wrote that these inspectors must follow their professional codes of ethics so

\$500 FINE



JOE LARESE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Owner Cruz Hernandez stands at Erie Cleaners in Blauvelt Feb. 25, 2015. They were fined \$500 for an overdue inspection last year, a violation they corrected.

that they don't favor the dry-cleaning owners paying them for inspections.

"Additionally, the performance of individual inspectors as well as their inspection reports are monitored and reviewed by DEC staff," Constantakes wrote in an email.

Not all dry cleaners have to be inspected because they simply may accept clothing and then transport the laundry to perc-based plants that clean high volumes of clothes.

Other dry cleaners that process clothing on site use chemical alternatives approved by the state DEC. Those approved solvents have names like Green Earth, Sasol and SolvonK4.

The majority of perc-using cleaners do not violate environmental laws. New York mandates that all new perc-based dry cleaning machines be "closed systems" in which the washing and drying are done in the same machine, which is not opened until all the solvent has been removed from the dried clothing while the air in the machine is recycled to reduce emissions.

Several local dry cleaners got warnings and violation notices that didn't result in fines last year.

Dry Cleaning by Fredericks at 464 Main St. in Armonk and at 660 Columbus Ave. in Thornwood got warning notices on Jan. 29, 2014, because the DEC hadn't received its annual inspection reports.

Hours Cleaners at 2110 Boston Post Road in Larchmont was cited on Aug. 25 for failing to keep its vapor barrier doors closed while operating its machine.

"Perchloroethylene odors could be smelled as far as the street," Hours Cleaners' violation notice stated.

Erie Cleaners' Hernandez said he worked for years in the dry-cleaning business before owning one, and he admitted that he wasn't prepared for all the requirements that come with operating a dry cleaner. His shop was also cited for improper record keeping in November.

Hernandez said he made many improvements to the store and has done his best to learn all the state's regulations since then.

"You have to (self-)inspect every week for leaks and you have to keep a record of it," Hernandez said on Feb. 19.

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\$1,000 FINE



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Ace Cleaners at 160 North Liberty St. in Stony Point on Feb. 19, 2015. The business paid a \$1,000 fine last year for violating state air pollution laws.

\$1,500 FINE



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The former Calco Cleaners at 345 Route 304 in Nanuet on Feb. 19, 2015. The business paid a \$1,500 fine last year for violating state air pollution laws.

\$1,000 FINE



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Classic Cleaners at 322 Saddle River Road in Monsey on Feb. 19, 2015. The business paid a \$1,000 fine last year for violating state air pollution laws.



WHAT MAKES A DRY CLEANER GREEN?

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What makes a dry cleaner green?

Some would argue that it's certainly not the cleaners that use perchloroethylene solvent (perc), a substance New York's laws strictly control. Still, there are many responsible perc-based dry cleaners using the latest washing machines that do not release any perc into the environment and completely remove perc from clothing after the wash and dry cycles. As for environmentally friendly dry cleaning, there are various opinions on whether it's even possible.

HERE ARE SOME GREENER OPTIONS:

WET CLEANING:

Machines wash dry-clean-only clothes with water and specially formulated soaps. Then the clothes are carefully dried, shaped and pressed. Most dry-clean-only garments can be washed this way. Eco Green Cleaners with five locations in Westchester County offers wet cleaning.

NON-PERC CLEANING:

Many local dry cleaners that advertise themselves as green or organic cleaners are using perc alternatives sanctioned by New York. Those solvents' brand names include Green Earth, EcoSolv, SolvonK4 or Sasol. Cross Westchester Cleaners in Eastchester uses one of these alternatives. The Natural Resources Defense Council claims these solvents aren't really green because they are still chemicals. The Green Business Bureau has certified Kreussler, the maker of SolvonK4, as an environmentally friendly organization.

HAND WASHING:

Companies like The Laundress make special fabric-specific detergents so that people can hand wash dry-clean-only items at home.

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