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Proposals Awaited for L.I. Breast Cancer Study

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AFTER five years of meetings, symposiums and throat-clearing, the Long Island Breast Cancer Study Project seems to be moving ahead as a deadline nears for proposals for the development of a program to investigate relationships between breast cancer and environmental contamination on Long Island.

The request for proposals was issued by the National Cancer Institute in May, and all applications for the two-year contract to develop the program must be in by Aug. 28. Several educational institutions and private mapping companies are expected to respond, with the winner selected and financed by the National Cancer Institute.

The Long Island Breast Cancer Study Project was established in 1993 by Federal mandate to identify environmental factors in the incidence of breast cancer in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, which is higher than in the state as a whole. Nassau's breast cancer rate is 117.1 per 100,000 women and Suffolk's is 110.6, compared with 101.5 statewide.

The five- to seven-year multimillion-dollar study aims to monitor women with breast cancer and their exposure to contaminated drinking water, indoor and ambient air pollution, electromagnetic fields, pesticides and hazardous waste.

A key component of the study, and the focus of the request for proposals, is what's known as a geographical information system, a computer-based program that will provide a detailed map matching breast cancer cases to specific environmental information for particular areas.

Much of the environmental data for the program has been compiled by Columbia University's School of Public Health, which collected information on DDT and hydrocarbons on the Island, and by the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which has been focusing on electromagnetic fields.

Breast cancer coalitions have long expressed frustration over the delay in establishing a geographical information study, and are particularly pleased that the process is moving forward.

"This has taken five years, so we're really excited that this is happening," said Karen Miller of the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition.

Ginny Regnante of West Islip, who was told she had breast cancer in 1980, said she has high hopes for the geographical information system. "The G.I.S. will determine what has changed in our environment that might be causing this," she said.

Dr. Roger Grimson, associate professor of preventative medicine at SUNY Stony Brook said, "The reason this has taken so long is that a G.I.S. has not been developed for diseases whose prognosis might take a long time."

Breast cancer activists have been conducting mapping projects of their own since 1992.

"The first study started in my living room," said Lorraine Pace, a breast cancer activist and educator in West Islip. She said the map was her permanent tablecloth for 18 months while she and other volunteers tagged areas of breast cancer clusters in West Islip.

Coalitions have been popping up all over Long Island with mapping projects of their own. The information they collect is submitted to the National Cancer Institute and county health departments to correlate with their information.