UF working to remove mercury from O'Dome

Chemical was used in building materials when arena was constructed

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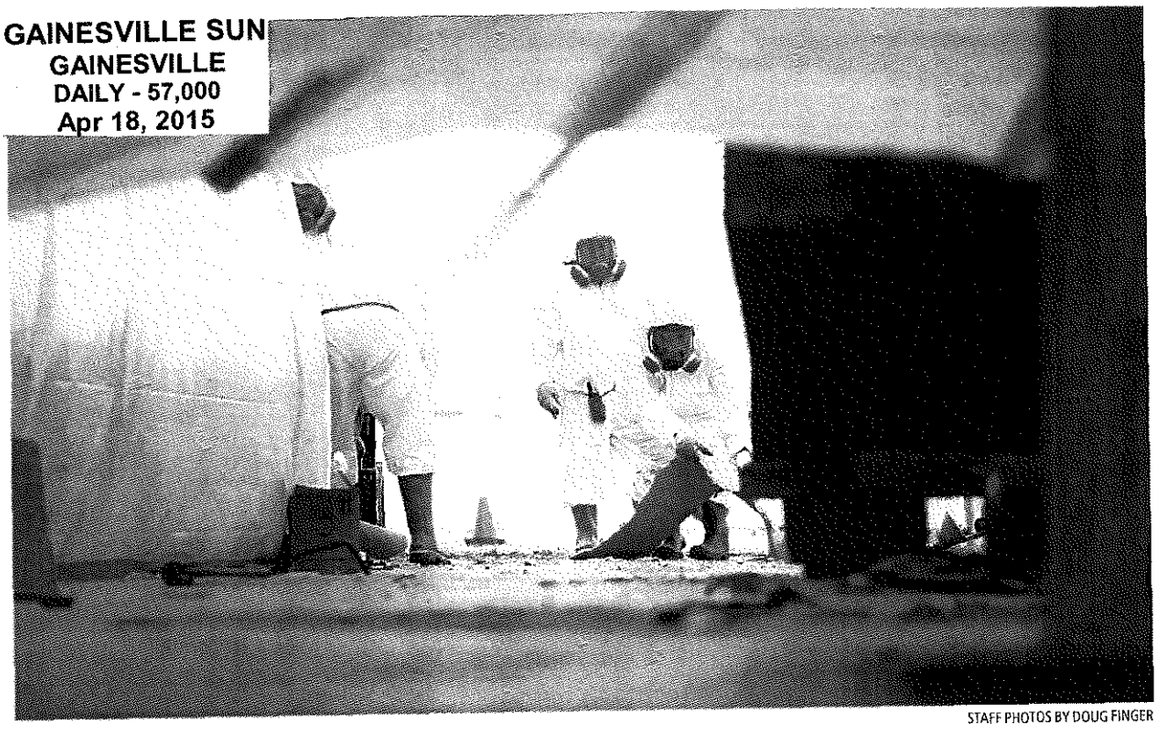


STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG FINGER

Workers remove a mercury-laden mat from the floor of the O'Connell Center on Friday.

By Jeff Schweers
Staff writer

The University of Florida is spending more than $800,000 to remove mercury that has been in the main floor of the O'Connell Center since the day the concrete floor was poured 35 years ago.

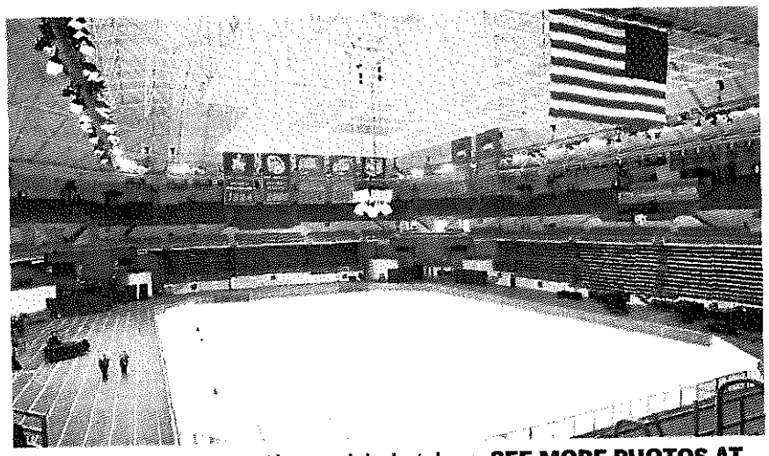
Back then, mercury was a common additive to building and track materials, said Bill Properzio, UF director of Environmental Health and Safety. The mercury was poured into the concrete as a liquid and gave it resiliency, he said.

"It used to be that manufacturers would put mercury in the compound to prevent mildew," Properzio said. "At one time, they didn't know it was an environmental problem or could be. It was fine as long as it wasn't tampered with."

Workers have encapsulated the interior of the arena, sealing it off with plastic tarps. The doors leading into the arena are barricaded and sealed with signs warning that mercury is present. Giant plastic tubes run from a south door on the lower level to a filtration system that sucks the gasses out of the work area and into containers so they don't leak into the air.

"It's not like the mercury you used to put in your hand as a kid," he said. "There is no pooling of elemental mercury."

Mercury also was commonly used in rubberized tracks, and was in the Percy Beard track before it was replaced with a rolled-out track that doesn't have mercury in it, he said.



Plastic sheeting covers the work being done. **SEE MORE PHOTOS AT WWW.GAINESVILLE.COM**

"There really haven't been big problems," he said. "We've made measurements on the track, and there was a slight amount of mercury being discharged from it, but it was outside, and nobody would have breathed it in."

The mercury is being removed in preparation for the eventual renovation of the O'Connell Center, which was delayed when UF changed construction managers after the budget came in at $64 million — $22 million over the original bid award.

The removal should be completed by the end of May, so that area high schools can have their graduations on schedule.

Once the mercury is gone the campus will not have any building material containing mercury, Properzio said.

The concern comes when workers dig up and shred the material during removal. "You could get off-gassing from the material," Properzio said.

The abatement design engineer is GLE, which was paid $92,636, said Janine Sikes, UF assistant vice president for media relations. The abatement contractor is Northstar Demolition. The total for the two phases of removal is $725,000, she said.

"They treat it just like asbestos removal," she said.