

[<<Back](#)

Car contaminated with asbestos sparks state-wide investigation

(New Haven-WTNH, Nov. 1, 2002 11:05 PM) _ Questions are being raised about how two dozen potentially toxic cars got into Connecticut. The vehicles were recovered from around the World Trade Center following the 9/11 attacks and were resold to dealerships.

- [Watch the story by News Channel 8's Sara Welch](#)

This is a story of a consumer and a dealership at odds over the sale of a contaminated vehicle. But we've learned this issue is much larger than that. Federal and state agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and the attorney general's office in Connecticut and New York are investigating. They are looking into how some of these cars fell back into the hands of consumers.

Smoke, soot and toxic debris spread over lower Manhattan as the towers collapsed. The dust coated everything in its path, including hundreds of cars and trucks. Vehicles like this Chevy Suburban.

"I thought it was the deal of the century I tell ya," says Joe Santino.

That deal of the century Santino says he got was a vehicle that had been in Lower Manhattan on September 11th.

"It should have never been allowed to happen."

At the end of July, almost a year after the terrorist attacks, Santino traded his old car for a used 2001 Chevy Suburban. He bought it at Diamond Auto in East Haven.

"I knew them all my life and I trusted them," he said.

The sales agreement fully disclosed the truck had come from the vicinity of the World Trade Center and Santino says the dealer assured him the vehicle was safe.

"He told me it was a World Trade Center recovery vehicle that it had dust and dirt and was all cleaned out."

It wasn't long before the Santinos started noticing something strange.

"It was just a dust that was appearing everywhere," Tracy Santino said. "The front doors; you would slam them, dust used to come up out of the corners."

Santino was especially concerned about the residue because his son has cystic fibrosis. He took pictures, collected a bag of debris and had it tested at a local lab.

"To my surprise, the guy called me the next day and told me don't drive the vehicle, get out of the vehicle and he told me it was loaded with asbestos."

Santino found more problems under the floorboards. Rubble and debris. He had another round of tests done.

Diamond Auto also sampled the truck and confirmed the presence of asbestos and immediately offered to buy back the vehicle.

Santino wasn't the only consumer facing a potential health risk. Betty Rohde also bought her Mitsubishi convertible from Diamond. Her car was also a World Trade Center recovery vehicle. She says the dealership called her and offered a free cleaning.

"Oh, I've never had a dealership call up and say we are in a real hurry to wash your car for you," she said. "No one is in a real hurry to do that for you."

Shortly after that phone call she received a letter from the dealership's attorney urging her car be tested for asbestos.

"It was mailed to me on 9/11, telling me my car could be contaminated."

The attorney general is investigating claims of contaminated vehicles associated with fallout from the World Trade Center.



"Consumers deserve their money back if they bought a car that was contaminated and that fact wasn't fully disclosed," said Richard Blumenthal.

"No one made me aware there was toxic debris in the vehicle."

In a statement, Diamond Auto says the Suburban was like new and had no problem passing an inspection at the DMV.

"This I got when I went and complained about the tests results," says Santino. He says a document given to him by a Diamond employee clearly states the vehicle had toxic debris in it. An insurance paperwork also labels the truck as a total loss.

"If he had this paper and he handed to me I'm assuming he knew."

The dealership says it denies any knowledge of the document or of any contamination prior to sale. In fact, the owner says he and his family personally drove the truck and put more miles on it than Mr. Santino.

A state investigation has identified 11 dealerships in Connecticut that bought World Trade Center recovery vehicles.

"We are investigating reports that some of the dealerships may have known about this contamination and that kind of knowledge without disclosure is certainly a violation of our laws," Blumenthal said.

About a dozen consumers who bought from dealerships around Connecticut may still be driving vehicles that could be contaminated.

"It would never occur to me. It's something none of us have experienced before."

It turns out Rhode's convertible tested negative for asbestos.

As for Santino's truck, the dealership bought it back and it's now sitting in a fenced in lot. Joe Santino wants someone held accountable

"Definitely. Somebody need to be responsible for this. There's too many innocent people who are hurt by this."

A spokesperson for Nationwide Insurance told us the vehicle came with documentation that it had toxic debris and was sold as salvage. When we asked for this in writing we were told the company needed to speak with an attorney.

The owner of Diamond Auto says his dealership is just as much as victim in all of this as the consumer. He expects to be reimbursed for Santino's car by the insurance company.

The Attorney General's office will be looking at the paper trail, who knew what along the way, and the bigger issue of why these cars were put back on the road in the first place.

So where are the other cars? The Attorney General's Office thinks it has identified the remaining 12 cars out on the road and has asked the owners to get them tested. If you think you might have a problem you can contact the Department of Motor Vehicles or the Attorney General's Office.



Content © Copyright 2000 - 2002, WorldNow, WTNH, and Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).