

Analysis

The logic behind Bechtel's report

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It has evoked expressions of shock and outrage from residents who wonder how the federal government could consider recommendations to convert a former government ordnance plant in Lewiston to a radioactive waste disposal center.

But the plan is based on sound economic and environmental logic, according to a consultant's report submitted in May to the U.S. Department of Energy.

The internal report, obtained two weeks ago by the Niagara Gazette, was written by Bechtel National Inc., a consulting firm based in Oak Ridge, Tenn., some 600 miles from the residents who would be affected by the conversion.

Although energy officials are still reviewing the Bechtel recommendation, Lewiston residents should not be surprised if the eventual decision is to convert the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works on Pletcher Road into a regional radioactive waste center.

The Bechtel report to the DOE, obtained almost two weeks ago by the Niagara Gazette, reviewed a number of options for the ordnance site before a final recommendation was made. Those options included:

- A complete cleanup and removal of all radioactive wastes now stored or buried on the 191-acre Lewiston site. Following total decontamination, the gov-

ernment property could be sold. Bechtel estimated the costs at \$115.6 million.

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•Continued storage of residues on a temporary basis, with additional remedial work to stabilize the radioactive materials. Eventually, the wastes would be removed for recycling or disposal elsewhere. Temporary storage would cost \$16.5 million, Bechtel estimated.

•Retention of the site for the disposal of additional low level radioactive wastes from New York and other Northeastern states. It was this option that Bechtel recommended to the Department of Energy.

"It obviates the need for establishing a new disposal site or using space at existing DOE sites (and) outlook for implementation in the

near-term is good," said Bechtel in its report.

Once Bechtel selected the disposal center option, it presented additional alternatives for the 16,000 tons of radioactive residues — most of it from the government's World War II Manhattan Project — now stored in Lewiston.

Among the options: Process certain of the wastes to reclaim valuable uranium ores, then stabilize the remaining waste material for final disposal on the Lewiston site. Total costs: \$112.5 million.

Ultimately, Bechtel rejected the recycling option for cost reasons, recommending instead the stabilization of the wastes for \$30.5 million. Then the site could be converted to a state disposal center for \$77.8 million or a regional repository for \$142.5 million.

Compared to the cost of establishing a regional disposal center, it appeared cheaper — by \$27.1 million — to remove the Lewiston wastes. But there was an additional factor that may have swayed the recommendation: The Lewiston ordnance property represented the solution to a major disposal headache facing federal energy officials.

The problem can be traced to World War II when a number of private companies in New York and adjoining states did contract work for the government under the Manhattan Project, which led to the development of the atomic bomb.

In the haste to develop and manufacture the bomb, government records have revealed a legacy of careless waste disposal resulting in the radioactive contamination of hundreds of acres of private land.

Ultimately, the Department of Energy has an obligation to clean up those private areas and transfer the material elsewhere for disposal. Currently, there is not a single low level waste burial ground in the entire Northeast.

Since five of the seven sites statewide needing cleanup work are in Western New York, a local disposal area would reduce transportation costs. It also would minimize the danger of transporting radioactive materials over long distances.

And the ordnance property in Lewiston is the only one of the contaminated Manhattan Project properties in the state owned by the Department of Energy.

The Lewiston ordnance complex is already contaminated with radioactive residues, it is owned by the government and it represents a probable solution to a major waste disposal problem, Bechtel concluded.

Bechtel's final recommendation: "Prepare to designate (the ordnance property) as a DOE waste management site."