

DOE Rejection of N-Dump Stirs Cautious Optimism in Lewiston

By JOANN SCELSA

News Niagara County Bureau

LEWISTON — Local officials and environmental leaders are viewing with guarded optimism a federal energy official's statement Tuesday that the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works will not be turned into a permanent, regional nuclear-waste repository.

While the new development appeared to be exactly the outcome that opponents of the repository plan have been seeking, they expressed a basic distrust of the federal government and its consultant, Bechtel National Inc.

"I'm very happy about it, naturally," Lewiston Councilman Joan Gipp said, "but we'll wait and see. It might be their 'shock-them, lull-them, sock-it-to-them' theory. But, if their hearts are in it, I'm very glad."

Alvin Ogg, also a Lewiston councilman, said "seeing is believing," adding that he thinks it is important for the community to continue gathering support and building its case in the event that the statements by Department of Energy officials are not what they appear to be.

"I think we would continue our present course of action," Mr. Ogg said, urging the community to continue seeking a clear, final decision on the sites future.

"I wouldn't see any reason to back off. This doesn't satisfy me that we should alter our course. I think we should put this to bed now. If the state and federal government have their way they'll procrastinate

into the next decade," Mr. Ogg said.

IN THE same vein, state Assemblyman Joseph Pillittere, D-Lewiston, said, "If it's true I'm very happy, but I don't trust DOE."

He said DOE's standard operating procedure is "to get everyone all excited, then say they're not going to do what they're really going to do and lull everyone into a sense of security for about six months, then come in with the machinery" and do what they planned from the beginning.

"I don't think anyone should be lulled into a false sense of security," Mr. Pillittere said. "I would suggest that Steve Nathanson continue his efforts to form a coalition of support in Western New York.

"This is not the time to let up on public pressure. You can't believe them."

Mr. Nathanson, spokesman for the "NO LOOW" committee, said he plans to do just that. He said nothing will satisfy his group short of a letter or contract signed by the next DOE secretary, when one is appointed, or Dr. Coffman, who is the acting director of DOE's office of terminal waste disposal and remedial action, stating that the site will be decommissioned and released for unrestricted use.

"Until we have that we're not going to let our guard down," Mr. Nathanson said. "This is contrary to what Bechtel and DOE have been saying. I think we should all take this with guarded optimism."

ONLY CANADIAN Margherita Howe, chairman of Operation Clean-Niagara, seemed willing to take the federal government at its word, at least for the time being.

"Thank God," Mrs. Howe said. "It was an inane proposal to begin with. Hopefully, it's been put to bed. I think the Canadian government was going to protest. I don't know if it did. Maybe that had something to do with it. I'm quite sure they (the DOE) were impressed with the uproar that ensued."

Mrs. Howe said the suggestion for a nuclear waste repository here was "so ludicrous" that she never really believed the U.S. government would go through with it.

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gress, to clean up and close the storage site.

A DOE official last month defended Bechtel's recommendation as "technically sound," but a problem politically. The congressmen told Secretary Edwards, who has since retired, that the Niagara Frontier already is bearing more than its fair share of the nation's burden of dealing with chemical and nuclear wastes.

Officials in the town and village of Lewiston were so incensed at the Bechtel plan that they considered trying to draw the government of Canada into the dispute.

Mr. Coffman's response to Rep. LaFalce emphasized that Bechtel's report was only a very preliminary one.

The report, Mr. Coffman wrote, did not represent "the department's position."

"We consider the range of alternatives assessed," Mr. Coffman said, "and the approach taken by Bechtel to be reasonable."

But Mr. Coffman said Bechtel's cost estimates were "somewhat conservative" and said DOE ultimately rejected the plan because Bechtel's "analysis was too limited, and other factors have to be considered."

Mr. Coffman did not say what the "other factors" were but Rep. LaFalce's objections to the plan were intense and unrelenting, and the nearby Love Canal, mentioned by the three congressmen in their letter to Mr. Edwards, already had caused a prolonged controversy.

MR. COFFMAN said his office is exploring ways to speed up the remedial action underway at the site "to control and stabilize all radioactive materials as rapidly and as completely as possible."

The current appropriation for the work is \$2.5 million. Mr. Coffman said DOE is considering collecting funds from other programs to accelerate DOE's remedial project in Lewiston.

The decision terminated a less-than-arm's-length arrangement between the government and the consultant, a subsidiary of the large and politically influential Bechtel Corp. of San Francisco, Calif.

Bechtel National — in the role of analyst — was given the rare opportunity to urge the government to expand a contract it already had.

DOE's remedial project contractor happens to be Bechtel. The firm replaced the National Lead Co. on Oct. 1, 1981, the first date on which the Reagan administration could make the change.

Bechtel Corp. alumni include Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

THE SECOND-ranking man in DOE at the time the department made the switch from National Lead to Bechtel National is another Bechtel Corp. alumnus, Deputy Energy Secretary W. Kenneth Davis.

Only a few months after getting the Lewiston project, Bechtel received the DOE commission to study the possibility of creating a regional repository.