

# Engineers overlook the human element

Hyde Park information meeting left fears unaddressed

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Former Niagara Falls City Manager Harvey Albond sat through 90 minutes of slides, overhead projections and technical talk at Niagara University the other night before commenting on the Hyde Park Boulevard chemical dump investigation and cleanup.

His remarks to state and federal officials sponsoring the informational program were right on target:

"This is the Love Canal all over again in one respect," said Albond, city manager during that crisis. "You are doing the same lousy human engineering job you did before."

Love Canal and Hyde Park are not the same, of course, except that Occidental Chemical Corp. — formerly Hooker Chemical — used both sites to dump chemical wastes.

At Love Canal, health-threatening chemicals leaked into nearby homes, forcing the evacuation of nearly 240 families in 1978 and another 400 or so, primarily because of ensuing hysteria, in 1980.

At Hyde Park — a chemical dump four times larger than Love Canal — no evidence currently exists that chemicals have leaked into homes in the Lewiston neighborhood, although the presence of contaminants two years ago forced a cleanup at several nearby factories.

What is certain is the threat to the environment, thus the reason for government lawsuits against Occidental three years ago. Occidental settled the Hyde Park suit out of court last April

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by agreeing to investigate and clean up the problem.

The settlement also provided for a public information program, run by government agencies, to keep residents informed of Occidental's progress. The public meetings in Buffalo and at Niagara University last week were the start of that program.

Residents and students sought simple explanations, assurances and, perhaps, some amount of understanding. What they got instead was hours of drawn out, tedious detail.

Unfortunately, both meetings were long on technical detail and the recitation of regulations and short on understanding the disruption and uncertainty that was forced upon residents because they lived or studied or worked near the Hyde Park dump.

Several area residents later complained officials hadn't informed them of the meetings.

The leading speaker, a state Department of Environmental Conservation engineer, offered minute engineering data on the construction and installation of monitoring wells. He didn't explain why the wells were installed.

When an attorney tried to question aspects of the safety plan, state officials told him the meeting was for general information and not specific issues.

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Despite the complexities of the public presentation, the actual remedial plan is reasonably simple to explain. Occidental must find out how far chemicals have migrated, then devise a plan to seal the leaky dump and remove, with best available technology, any toxins that escaped into the environment.

Right now, Occidental is still investigating. Starting at the dumpsite, investigators are working outward in every direction.

To do this, the company is drilling holes in the ground. The soil and groundwater are sampled and analyzed for chemical concentrations. The holes are drilled by huge rigs operated by workers wearing white suits and auxiliary breathing apparatus.

It is an unnerving sight to see those crews in the neighborhood, residents say.

Niagara University students expressed concern about their safety: Hyde Park and the contaminated Bloody Run Creek are near the campus. State officials erroneously said the university had prevented Occidental drilling crews from entering the campus.

In fact, the university had welcomed the drilling program to allay the fears of its students.

The meetings, as Albond summarized near the end of the Niagara University session, were a poor job of "human engineering."

"You are creating trauma to people, to workers, to neighborhoods, to property," Albond said.

And, referring to the government's handling of Love Canal, he added, "I see the repetition — through bureaucratic means and engineering — recurring today."