

GUEST VIEW

Rid Lewiston of radioactive waste

By Timothy Henderson

The key to ridding Lewiston of its radioactive legacy from the Manhattan Project hinges on the availability of a suitable place to ship it. Even if the federal Department of Energy can be convinced to share the view that the radioactive residues must go — a view held by the Federal EPA, New York state's Health Department and Department of Environmental Conservation, the local town board and regional environmentalists — if there is no place to ship them to, any decision by the National Academy of Sciences of final site determination will be moot, and Lewiston keeps the wastes by default.

We are told that it may not be safe to bury the country's radioactive wastes underground in deep, arid repositories out west. Just how safe was it to test hundreds of nuclear bombs underground during the 50s and 60s? We are informed that "there is no immediate danger" to the surrounding population near the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site. Probably somewhat true. A lot of cancers and autoimmune system diseases like MS take more than 20 years to surface. But a half-truth is still a whole lie. There are so many gaping holes in the official statements coming from the DOE that they should go into the Swiss cheese business.

In a January 1994 letter from the DOE to a concerned citizen, the 250,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste buried during the cleanup of the site off Pletcher Road was referred to as "slightly contaminated" (but its too hazardous to move, right?) At a public availability session I

asked about the presence of plutonium-laden soil at the site. I received a flat "no" from Ron Kirk, the DOE site manager. At a subsequent meeting, I brought up the subject again. Following another



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denial, I produced a document, ironically a DOE document, which stated on several pages the presence of plutonium found on-site. Note: Plutonium is non-existent in nature, created in nuclear reactors, highly radioactive and used as the sparkplug in detonating an atomic bomb. "Slightly contaminated?" Yeah, right.

One of the arguments that has been used by the DOE for not moving its time bomb is that it would be too expensive or not "cost effective." Apparently these weren't concerns to those who chose to ship it here in the first place. From all recent indications, money appears to be no object to this bureaucratic agency with a burgeoning annual budget of more than \$20 billion dollars! DOE Secretary O'Leary committed more than \$50 billion to cleaning up the Hanford facility in Washington state over the next 25 years. President Clinton pledged \$400 million to the Soviet Ukraine earlier this year to help it disarm its warheads, along with an entire train of 25 specially fitted railcars to transport the retired weapons. In 1992, property owners within two miles of the uranium processing plant in Fernald, Ohio, were awarded

\$73 million by the DOE in compensation for the decline in their property values. The radioactive residues buried in the clay tomb off Pletcher Road are carcinogens of the highest magnitude and may have already done their evil deed for the first 30 years following World War II. The landfill is only serving as an incarceration center for what may have been years of unabated crimes against innocent people. While the state Legislature contemplates legalized gambling, we've been forced to gamble with our very lives for years. (Niagara County is ranked second in the entire country for industrial discharge of suspected carcinogens into the water, and it is certainly no coincidence that Roswell Park is located in Western New York.)

I believe that Lewiston has a fighting chance to rid itself of this haunting. When it happens, we can all join in a collective sign of relief. Congressman John LaFalce and his staff are squarely in our corner and working towards this end. He initiated the National Academy of Science's review, and when some nameless, faceless politicians from far-away places hinted that Lewiston might be considered for additional wastes, he stopped them mid-thought and put his foot down. Stating in no uncertain terms, "No way." His foot remains down. Mr. Kirk of Starship DOE has to realize that just because there is no national repository at this time, we must still boldly pursue this new frontier so that this country can finally ship its radioactive waste where no waste has gone before.

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