

Mission Impossible

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LOCKPORT — At last count there were 716 potentially hazardous sites throughout Niagara County, from radioactive dumps too hot to handle to abandoned gas stations leaking fuel into the ground.

In Lewiston-Porter, more than 50 underground storage tanks are still full of radioactive uranium waste collected during the development of the atomic bomb. In Newfane, creeks are poisoned with mercury, PCB and heavy metal sediment. In a wooded area in North Tonawanda, the soil is too contaminated from industrial waste to erect the simplest structure.

Most of the sites — called brownfields, former commercial or industrial properties seen as a potential threat to the environment — are in Niagara Falls, that graveyard of industry.

A Niagara County group of about 30 municipal leaders and private citizens has been given a

When members of the Niagara County Brownfields Working Group finished counting the potentially hazardous former commercial or industrial sites across the county, they had a list of more than 700. Now, the committee has budgeted nearly half of its \$200,000 grant to study cleaning up just two of the worst sites.

By BILL MICHELMORE / News Niagara County Bureau

meager budget of \$200,000 and the seemingly impossible task of cleaning them up.

The Niagara County Brownfields Working Group, a committee of the county Department of Planning, Development and Tourism, was formed in January with a grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency to take on the huge clean-up job.

"This is our challenge," said Edmund P. Sullivan, the county's brownfields coordinator. "How to deal with these under-utilized

sites."

The first step was to identify them. Members of the working group took a four-hour bus tour of many of the sites in August, driving by some and getting out to inspect others. To many of the men and women on the bus, the trip was an eye-opener.

"It was a rude awakening," said Wilson Councilman Brad Clark, who represents the town and village of Wilson on the committee. "Some of these places I've been driving by all my life but

they're so overgrown, I never realized how bad they are. It's about time we opened up other people's eyes."

Many of the sites — 716 by Sullivan's count — have been lying dormant for decades, with unknown contaminants seeping into the surface soil and the surrounding area.

"The committee has a huge job ahead of it," said Michael J. Basile, community relations specialist for the EPA's public information office in Niagara Falls.

"But the EPA gave money to the county because the county has a plan of action that will take a lot of blighted sites off the registry."

EPA grants have gone to 150 municipalities nationwide since 1995, including 10 cities or counties in New York state, but this is the first time Niagara County has been on the receiving end.

"Idle manufacturing sites are a major problem for Niagara County, which may contribute to its lagging economy," said an EPA spokesman. "Many sites that were once used to produce steel, build aircraft and manufacture chemicals are now left dormant."

Cleaning up and redeveloping the county's brownfields sites is the key to creating jobs and stabilizing the region's economy, the spokesman said.

'Seed money'

Basile calls the \$200,000 feder-

See Brownfields Page NC5

Brownfields: Nine of the priority cleanup sites are in the City of Niagara Falls

Continued from Page NC1

al grant "seed money" to allow the brownfields working group to identify the problems and generate additional federal, state and local funding.

Sullivan said if his group can rack up a few "success stories" early on, the initial grant will give them the leverage to get more funding, particularly from the private sector.

One of the most difficult sites in the cleanup campaign is the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works in the towns of Lewiston and Porter, which held radioactive waste during World War II.

"Most of the site is too hot to qualify as a brownfield," said Timothy Henderson, the committee's Lewiston representative. "A lot of the stuff still has to be moved out. But parts of it are eligible for brownfields funding."

The Army took charge of the site in 1997, half a century after the facility was used for storing radioactive residues and wastes from uranium ore processing conducted during the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb. Also during World War II, the Army manufactured TNT at a facility on the site and stored it in concrete pipes.

The former defense site is just one of 24 potentially hazardous sites across the county identified by the Brownfields Working Group as its top priority projects. Nine of the sites are in the City of Niagara Falls.

"The city should be ashamed that we have two pages of the sites," Christopher Schmidt, environmental assistant with the city's Office of Environmental Services, recently told the committee. "We have a lot of work to do."

Several of the city sites are abandoned gas stations whose underground storage tanks may have leaked fuel into the surrounding soil.

"Even if the sites aren't contaminated, there's a perception that they are," said Schmidt. "We're trying to remove that perception."

On a regional level, the task of cleaning up all the sites is daunting, said Schmidt, but if local municipalities throughout the county take responsibility for their own communities, the mission becomes less intimidating.

"The county should be applauded for taking the lead in this operation, but we need a grassroots approach to get the job done," Schmidt said. "It's the role of each member of the brownfields group to take the message back to their communities to address the issue and determine a plan of action."

Cleaning up all 24 priority sites would take years and cost millions, said Schmidt, and tackling all 716 sites throughout the county would be an impossible task for the brownfields group.

"If you look at the big picture it can be overwhelming," Henderson agreed. "But you have to start somewhere."

Two priorities

The brownfields committee decided at a recent meeting to take that first, modest step. It will spend \$5,000 to hire a consulting firm to eyeball the obvious environmental problems at two of the priority sites: the abandoned Dus-sault Foundry in Lockport, and a former agriculture chemical manufacturing plant in Barker.

This preliminary, walk-through investigation is called a Phase 1 study and involves no testing of potentially hazardous materials. The committee will then spend \$85,000 on Phase 2, in which the consulting firm will identify the specific nature of the environmental concerns, run tests on materials and determine the cost to remedy the situation. Both phases are expected to take several months.

Once the environmental studies have been completed, the brownfields group would then engage the help of the public and private sectors in Lockport and Barker to acquire the money to develop the sites.

The ultimate plan for the former foundry, empty since 1995 and located near the gutted Union Station in the historic Lowertown district on bluffs overlooking the Erie Canal, is to develop a retail-commercial shopping complex. The site has great potential, said Sullivan, and the redevelopment could be coordinated with the canal revitalization and the restoration of Union Station.

Plans for the 11-acre Barker Chemical plant on West Somerset Road, which has been vacant since the early 1980s, include a combined commercial and "new urban-

ism" residential development consistent with the Village of Barker streetscape and architecture, Sullivan said.

Replacing the blighted area of Barker with a modern complex is long overdue and would attract new businesses and residents to an increasingly attractive part of the county, committee members agreed.

Clark, whose village of Wilson is on Lake Ontario, sees the brownfields project as essential to development in his area, also. One of the major concerns in Wilson, he said, is the old Cambria-Wilson town landfill, capped 18 years ago and now a mowed field, but still a potential problem. The committee feels it could be developed into a golf course with a park and grass-land habitat for wildlife.

"Lake Ontario is becoming more and more favorable to developers," Clark said. "In Wilson, for example, new and exciting things are going to be happening there."

Many of the sites could be made into pocket parks, said James W. Ward, committee member and county legislator from Newfane. "We're going to see some real nice ones in Lewiston. A lot of people are getting excited about that."

Clark is preparing for an uphill climb.

"This is just the first step in a long staircase," he said. "You hate to uncover a bunch of blighted areas and not be able to do anything about them. But if we can get the funding, something can be done. It looks promising."

Lockport and area sites

Lockport's old Mill District, an historic manufacturing strip along Eighteenmile Creek, contains several brownfield sites.

■ The old Flintkote site was in continuous use since the early 1840s, including a sawmill, paper mill and most recently in the manufacture of roofing materials. Flintkote ceased operating in the early 1980s.

■ Power Generation Facility, the plant for the former Beaver Board Co. that once employed hundreds of people, has been under-utilized since the early 1960s.

Proposals for the site include an industrial heritage museum with adjoining store.

■ Plaslok, the site of a former plastic manufacturer destroyed by

"Some of the buildings have been abandoned all my life," said county Legislator John Cole, who grew up on the hill above Lower-town and whose 16th legislative district includes the old Mill Street area. "When I was a kid we used to play in those old stone buildings. They were like the Roman Coliseum to us. Now they're just eyesores."

Cole and fellow Legislator Gerald DeFlippo of the 15th district, helped form the brownfields committee. The old Dussault Foundry divides their legislative districts.

■ Another Lockport site is Guterl Steel on Ohio Street, formerly known as Simonds Steel, where uranium rods were manufactured and thorium was milled from 1948 to 1956. Guterl operated a 70-acre steel mill on the property until 1983.

Most of the property was sold in 1984 to Allegheny Ludlum Steel Corp., which operates a small-scale steel mill there, but the remaining nine acres contain radioactive materials and contaminated soil, the committee said. If the materials are removed, the area could be used for commercial and light industrial development.

When DeFlippo was growing in the West End, the Simonds steel mill employed 500 people.

"It would be a great spot for an industrial park," DeFlippo said. "If we can ever get it cleaned up. There's contaminated stuff in there, but I don't know what it is."

■ Newfane sites include Lockport Felt, next to Eighteenmile Creek, which manufactured felt paper for almost 80 years; Oldham sawmill; and Eighteenmile Creek itself, which is contaminated with mercury, PCB and heavy metal sediment.

"I used to swim Eighteenmile as a boy," said Cole. "You wouldn't catch me in it now."

■ The Town of Pendleton has Frontier Chemical, an unclaimed 71-acre parcel, 4 acres of which is landfill. Bounded by Bull Creek to the north and containing a pond, the site has tremendous potential for a park and wildlife refuge, the brownfields committee said.

North Tonawanda sites

North Tonawanda sites include:

■ Gratiwick Riverside Park, originally a dumping ground for metallurgical sludge, then used by the city as a municipal landfill. Remedial action is currently in progress and extensive restoration work is planned.

A boat launch, a grassland wildlife area and upgraded park facilities are planned.

■ Roblin Steel, a 24-acre former steel mill now owned by the City of North Tonawanda, has been investigated and a remedial

report has been completed. The city plans to apply for additional state brownfields funding to begin Phase 2, identifying the severity of the environmental problems and determining the cost to remedy them.

■ Durez Chemical, a 40-acre inner city site where plastic resin compounds were manufactured from the 1920s until 1996.

The factory buildings were razed and the area has high redevelopment potential, according to a committee report.

■ Wurlitzer, a 44-acre site that abuts several residential neighborhoods, was found to have heavy metal plating sludge during a Phase 1 investigation in 1989 and confirmed in a 1992 Phase 2 study. Contaminated surface soils were found in a 7-acre wooded area along Wurlitzer Drive.

Falls has most sites

Stuck with the biggest slice of the contaminated pie is the City of Niagara Falls. The priority sites include:

■ Urban Development Corp./Ninth Street Property. Six vacant parcels totaling 27.95 acres, former railroad property along Ninth Street that now surround multi-family, subsidized housing, making re-use difficult, according to Schmidt. The city is working with the Empire State Development Corp. to split the cost of a site assessment this fall.

■ Niagara Vest/Hazorb Property, originally 24 acres and 550,000 square feet of heavy industrial buildings, was first occupied in 1910 by National Carbide Co., which manufactured carbon electrodes. The plant was one of three Niagara Falls area facilities owned and operated by Union Carbide that manufactured coal-based carbon products used by alloy reduction smelters to make specialty graphite, carbon liners, cathode blocks and electrodes for furnaces. Waste products from all three plants were deposited in a landfill on the Republic Plant property in the Town of Niagara. The plant was sold to Niagara Vest Inc. in 1986. Attempts to sell the entire facility failed and in 1987 the property was subdivided and sold to individual businesses. Portions of the property have been acquired by the city for back taxes.

■ Maryland/James Property. The vacant, 8.5-acre urban renewal site at Maryland and James Avenues previously housed an auto repair shop, cleaner, welding shop and church, all since demolished. Construction debris and contaminated fill material have been dumped on the site.

■ Cerrone Industrial Park. Though privately owned, the 17-

acre industrial park anchored by Tecmotiv USA Inc. lies within the Niagara Falls Economic Development Zone. Light industrial and warehouse facilities are expected to be built there.

■ Tract II Property. A collection of vacant land and abandoned buildings at the intersection of Highland and Beech avenues obtained by the city through foreclosure. The 27 acres cannot be marketed in its current condition and is not economically feasible to be privately developed, Schmidt said.

A 200,000-square-foot structure, built in 1912, and an underground garage remain on the site. Asbestos and ground contamination is highly likely, said Schmidt, and cleanup costs are expected to be substantial.

■ Hysen Property. A complex of buildings at the intersection of Buffalo and Adams avenues and Portage Road, the first of which dates back to 1926 and was originally occupied by Acheson Graphite. The facility was closed in 1982. Environmental concerns include a large amount of asbestos insulation in the buildings, heavy dusts and residues from past manufacturing, contaminated soil, existing transformers and a large accumulation of pigeon feces.

There is also an underground storage tank. All the buildings are to be demolished to make way for a proposed specialty steel mill, Schmidt said.

■ East Black Creek Village. The 54-acre eastern portion of the Love Canal revitalization project has been approved for light industrial and commercial development. A few former homes remain.

Brownfields coordinator Sullivan, who has a master's degree in environmental planning and ecology from the University of Wisconsin and is a former operations manager with Chevron Oil Co., has the EPA grant-funded post until November 2000.

Is that time enough to make a difference?

"We certainly have a real challenge ahead of us, but I see it as a great opportunity to try and turn some of these properties around and integrate them back into the community," Sullivan said. "Yes, you will see results."

The EPA's Basile summed up the group's mission: "One day these brownfields will be green fields."

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I never realized how bad they are. It's about time we opened up other people's eyes."
Wilson Councilman Brad Clark, a member of the Niagara County Brownfields Working Group**



SHARON CANTILLON/Buffalo News

County Legislator John Cole, left, walks through the former Dussault Steel Foundry property behind Union Station in Lockport with fellow Legislator Gerald DeFina. The