

EDITORIALS

MANHATTAN PROJECT WASTES

The 'other' nuclear dump

For all the commendable speed and effort the Army Corps of Engineers is putting into cleanups at four Town of Tonawanda radioactive-waste sites, recent work at a related site in Lewiston offers a sobering reminder that more costly and hazardous remediation still remains undone.

Eighteen years after a State Assembly study concluded contaminants have been released from the site, and four years after the National Research Council warned of the "large potential risk to the public" from high-level uranium ore residues, the corps' removal of vast amounts of decaying TNT from the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works raises questions about radiation dangers that still haven't been addressed.

During the Manhattan Project of World War II and a few ensuing years of research, uranium ores were refined here for atomic bomb development. The ore residues, laced with uranium and radium, are a dangerous legacy. While the Tonawanda-site cleanup is under way, the wastes at the renamed

Past studies have hinted at federal mismanagement of the site and misleading statements to local leaders. That can be consigned to history, but the corps must make sure to stay focused on the future.

Niagara Falls Storage Site — in a less-settled region, but only about a mile from four schools in the Lewiston-Porter system — are part of a network of underground storage tanks and cells that still needs investigation.

The corps spends \$400,000 a year just to monitor the site, where high radioactivity was measured in 1985 when the wastes were moved from an old water tower to the clay-sealed basement of a razed site building. The 10-acre uranium residue storage cell hasn't been penetrated since.

Despite a 1988 corps preliminary

study recommending cleanup, no such action has been started. A new study, considering whether the wastes should be removed or the cell should be strengthened, won't be finished until August 2001.

Meanwhile, nearby residents and environmentalists worry about earthquake faults, and the possibility that radioactive contamination already could be leaking from the storage cell and into the ground water that occasionally seeps to the surface of the poorly drained site.

Past studies have hinted at federal mismanagement of the site and misleading statements to local leaders. That can be consigned to history, but the corps must make sure to stay focused on the future. Its studies should stay on track, and accelerate if possible.

The admirable record compiled by the corps in Tonawanda should have its counterpart in Niagara County, where communities face an equally daunting threat to health and safety.