What further exposure may arise from CWM activity?

There has been extensive recent press coverage of the CWM application for a new permit to expand the capacity of its Model City hazardous waste land-filling facility. Much of the general concern relating to this surrounds the possibility of the Hudson River PCB's coming to this facility.

However, an even larger concern is the fact that the CWM site is located on the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works (LOOW), which has been extensively documented in the public record as having suffered significant radiological and chemical contamination as a result of former Department of Defense activities on this site.

To be more specific, the Niagara Falls storage site, less than a half mile away from CWM, houses the worlds largest stockpile of Radium 226, one of the most dangerous of all radioactive isotopes. Apart from this specific stockpile, both the Falls storage site and CWM are known to have elevated levels of background radiation, three times the normal background for our area.

Presumably, this higher level of background radiation on CWM property is a result of prior Department of Defense activities on the LOOW site, combined with earth-moving activities by first SCA, then CWM in connection with its landfill activities, prior to attempts to clean up its site by the Department of Energy.

The obvious questions that come to mind is what exposure to radioactive dust has the community already suffered and what further exposure may arise from the continuing and planned excavations of the CWM property?

It is at least encouraging that Richard Sturges, district manager for CWM, stated recently that the construction of CWM's new proposed landfill, RMU2, will take account of any potential radiological and chemical contamination to allay public concerns.

A question relating to his statement is, how exactly will CWM make its assessment of the potential radiological hazards, given that until now, such potential radiological hazards have not been considered by either CWM or the Department of Environmental Conservation?

There clearly are many approaches to this, from taking a single soil sample and waving a Geiger counter across it to a very detailed, statistically based, multiple sample approach.

In fact, there is no need to reinvent the wheel on this topic, as the perfect model exists for carrying out this assessment — the approach taken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the adjacent part of the LOOW site, the Falls storage site, which is under its control.

It is clear that the only way, beyond reasonable doubt, to be sure that the CWM location's prior radiological contamination does not pose a threat to CWM workers and our community is to follow the Army Corps. of Engineers' example. No one else has its detailed knowledge of the geography, history and chemistry of this site.

In order to support Mr. Sturges' goal of allaying the public's fears, I would like to suggest that this work be carried out in conjunction with a coalition of stakeholders to include members of the local community and for a University of Buffalo department to act in an oversight capacity.

Also, I would like to suggest as a precautionary measure that radiation monitors are set up around the rear perimeter of the Lew-Port campus and at strategic locations at surrounding properties.

Although I feel nothing less than this rigorous approach is acceptable, I have to say that, logically, I fail to come to terms with how the DEC and EPA can allow any private company to excavate a large hole in the ground close to the worlds largest stockpile of radium 226.

Geraint Roberts is a resident of Youngstown.