



CHARLES LEWIS/Buffalo News

A group of Lewiston-Porter High School students will attempt to unearth the truth about the buried chemicals and toxic waste landfills that are causing deep concern in their towns. Members include, seated, left to right, Kim Wills, Matt Agnello and Julie Freeland, and standing, left to right, Martrice Gandy, Brandon Winkley, Katie Olson and chemistry teacher Michelle Hinchliffe, the group's adviser.

Lew-Port student group joins fight against buried atomic waste

By BILL MICHELMORE

News Niagara Bureau

LEWISTON — A group of Lewiston-Porter high school students has taken up the fight to clarify and clean up the area's toxic legacy.

"Most people seem to think the chemicals in the ground are nothing to get concerned about," said Matthew Agnello, 16, president of an environmental group called Promoting Local Environmental Awareness. "But it definitely should concern all Lew-Port students, and the teachers and administrators, too."

Agnello reactivated an organization that had been dormant for several years. The group is the student equivalent of such established environmental organizations as Residents for Responsible Government and Residents Organized for Lewiston-Porter Environment, both of which have been waging frustrating battles to get the government to remove potential health hazards from the ground, or at least identify them.

Agnello has been well-tutored in the matter: his father, Vincent, is an executive member of Residents for Responsible Government, which represents 300 people in the towns of Porter and Lewiston.

"There has been a 60-year history of dumping toxic chemical waste by the federal government and by private companies in the towns of Porter and Lewiston," said the elder Agnello, who lives in Youngstown. "It's important for the residents of both towns to understand the history and hazards that the sites pose."

Bill Choboy, president of Resi-

dents for Responsible Government, put it bluntly.

"Waste from the first atomic bomb is still buried in our back yard."

Choboy praised the grass roots effort by the students and urged them to read all they can on the local environment and become champions for change in the area's decades-old problem.

The students meet twice monthly at the high school, with chemistry teacher Michelle Hinchliffe serving as adviser.

"Our purpose is to study the matter objectively so that residents will have a greater understanding of the situation," said Matt Agnello.

Agnello and Hinchliffe stressed their goal of objectivity in dealing with the toxic issue. The group has heard from representatives of Residents for Responsible Government and has invited spokesmen from Chemical Waste Management — the largest hazardous waste landfill in the Northeast — to explain its role and the environmental impact on the community.

"There are two sides to every story, and to be educated, you have to know both sides," Hinchliffe said.

The resurgence of the student group coincides with soil testing by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in and around the school grounds.

"This is the right time for the students to focus on environmental concerns," said Bill Rolland, secretary of Residents for Responsible Government. "I see this as an opportunity for a real-life learning lab."

The suspect chemicals are buried in the Niagara Falls Storage Site, a landfill in the Town of Lew-

iston that is about a mile from the Lewiston-Porter school complex and its 2,500 students. CWM is also nearby. A \$50 million expansion plan by CWM to enlarge its 710-acre site on Balmer Road in Porter with an additional 50-acre landfill is being challenged in court by Residents for Responsible Government. The group recently lost a civil suit against the expansion and will begin a second round of legal challenges, Rolland said.

The chemical waste in the storage site was radioactive residue from the manufacture of atomic weapons at the then-Lake Ontario Ordnance Works during World War II's Manhattan Project.

Unexplained illnesses and deaths among former Lewiston-Porter students and teachers over the years have raised questions in the community about a possible link to the contaminated sites.

"The area could definitely be cancer causing," said Matt Agnello.

A recent state government study of the incidence of cancers contracted by residents in the Ransomville area from 1995 to 1999 found that the total number of cancers diagnosed in males was "significantly greater than the number expected." The cancer numbers for females "was not significantly different," the report concluded.

The state said the study will expand to include cases in the Lewiston-Porter area over 10 years.

As for the new student group, the elder Agnello, who is director of Niagara University's Family Business Center, said, "I'm thrilled that the younger generation is taking an active role in protecting the environment, which, of course, they will inherit."