

# NIAGARA COMMUNITY NEWS

**Q&A: Sean Kelly**

## New advisory board chairman aims to facilitate waste cleanup

By BILL MICHELMORE

NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU



Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

**What does Niagara Falls need to succeed? "We need a progressive spirit, a willingness to take chances and a willingness, frankly, to fail — and thereby the opportunity to succeed," says Sean Kelly, associate professor of political science at Niagara University.**

NIAGARA FALLS — Sean Kelly is a Seattle native who moved here from North Carolina in 1999 to be an associate professor of political science at Niagara University. He was surprised by the number of potentially dangerous toxic-waste sites in the county and decided to get involved.

Kelly is the founding director of NU's Environmental Leadership Institute and director of the university's environmental studies program.

Now he has been appointed chairman of the Restoration Advisory Board, a community-based group that is working with the Army Corps of Engineers to clean up hazardous-waste sites in the towns of Lewiston and Porter.

The main focus of the Corps is the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, a 7,500-acre area that was used in the Manhattan Project research and manufacture of atomic weapons during and immediately after World War II.

The sprawling area contains the 191-acre Niagara Falls Storage Site, a landfill where contaminated nuclear waste was buried. Next to it is the 600-acre Chemical Waste Management facility, the largest hazardous-waste disposal site in the Northeast. Modern Corp., a solid-waste disposal company, also has a landfill nearby.

Located within the boundaries of the former ordnance site is the Lewiston-Porter Central School District, with 2,500 students.

**That whole area is quite a mess. What is your job?**

My role is to be an honest broker, to earn people's trust and show them that nothing is being hidden in our efforts to clean up these sites.

**So you're aware of the public skepticism and general lack of confidence in the Army Corps' cleanup efforts so far?**

Yes, and I hope to change that. I expect in the end we will have

made substantial progress. Two years from now, I want people to look at the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works issue and feel better about the situation than they do now.

**Will the area be cleaned up by then?**

I can't say that. Everybody wants to be at that point. People want answers, and we'd all like to do it faster, but the matter is very complex. Lack of government funding, for one thing, slows us down. The war in Iraq and the war on terrorism have made demands on government resources, and the funding is not there for the environment.

**What have you been doing in your first month as chairman?**

An internal study on the effectiveness of the Restoration Advisory Board. Following that, we'll get together and figure out what we have to change.

**Such as?**

One of the main problems is that the original 7,500-acre site has become split up over the years. Parts of it are now owned or occupied by Modern Landfill, the Lewiston-Porter School District, Chemical Waste Management and private homes. The corps only has jurisdiction over a relatively small part of it, notably the Niagara Falls Storage Site and various smaller parcels. So you have this multijurisdictional problem, and the challenge to the Restoration Advisory Board is extraordinary.

**How vulnerable are the Lewiston-Porter students in this matter?**

The schools are right there in the middle of it, and you have to consider the radiological problem. There are great concerns about public health, but the Army Corps doesn't have the authority to measure the public health. The Corps has to pass that on to the county and state health depart-

ments. The County Legislature is also very interested in the health impact.

**How is that working out?**

It's notoriously difficult to draw some conclusion about cause and effect because there's not a single cause. People aren't exposed to one environmental health effect. There are multiple causes, ranging from the outside environment to personal habits, such as smoking.

**Will there ever be a conclusive study of the health effects?**

It's entirely possible there never will be. What you hope is to put together the best health study you can.

**Are you personally concerned about health effects on your own family — your wife and 6-year-old daughter?**

I could be. My daughter goes to Stella Niagara, which is a mile or two from CWM and the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site, but I am officially objective on the

question.

**Are you optimistic that the area can eventually be cleaned up and the health issues resolved?**

I wouldn't be doing this if I thought it was impossible. I don't think we'll solve the matter in my two-year term as chairman, but I hope to make significant headway.

**Since your real job is teaching political science, let's finish with a political question. Many people say development in Niagara Falls has been stifled and even stopped over the years by petty political bickering. What's your take on the situation?**

Most people in the community are in a conservative mode and intent on maintaining their piece of the pie. They see development as a threat and don't want to give up what they've got. They don't want their piece of the pie to get any smaller.

**What does Niagara Falls need to move ahead?**

People in political office who are willing to make bold decisions, to try things that haven't been tried before. We need a progressive spirit, a willingness to take chances and a willingness, frankly, to fail — and thereby the opportunity to succeed.

**Are you the man to do it?**

Hell, no. I'm a college professor.

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Kelly encourages community membership in the Ordnance Works advisory board and asks those interested to contact Bill Choboy at 745-7790 or bille313@yahoo.com.

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