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High-profile waste sites inspire founding of Niagara Watershed Alliance

New group to target water pollution

By Aaron Besecker
NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

A group of citizens and elected leaders in Niagara County has created a new environmental organization to deal with water pollution issues, not only here but in the entire Great Lakes Basin.

Founding members of the group, called the Niagara Watershed Alliance, said they are focusing on preventing chemicals and other toxic substances from being discharged into waterways that feed the Niagara River and Great Lakes systems.

“That certainly needs to be addressed, in the global sense, for the sake of our future generations,” said Niagara County Legislator Clyde L. Burmaster, R-Ransomville.

The organization intends to focus beyond Niagara County, though two of the county’s highest-profile waste sites were part of the founders’ inspiration.

CWM Chemical Services, the Northeast’s only hazardous waste landfill, and the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works — now known as the Niagara Falls Storage Site — where federal authorities are investigating both radiological and chemical contamination, have been a concern of the group’s members for years.

Many of the people who are already part of the organization have been part of other groups — the CWM Community Advisory Committee, the LOOW Restoration Advisory Board and Residents for Responsible Government — that deal specifically with one of those two sites.

Both the advisory committee and the restoration board have faced challenges gaining what they feel is sufficient recognition and participation from some of the main parties involved in those sites.

The new group is seen as an avenue to make progress, representatives said.

Members also said they are looking to cooperate with the multitude of governments on both sides of the U. S.-Canadian border, as well as other groups with similar goals, to make the most of their efforts.

“We have to combine and work with other environmental groups and various elected leaders in other communities,” said William A. Choboy, a former Porter councilman. “We just have to get together.”

Choboy said his inspiration to help form the group arose largely from the failure of a bill that would have limited the locations of hazardous waste landfills.

The State Legislature passed the measure twice. But then-Gov. George E. Pataki and his successor, Eliot L. Spitzer, vetoed it.

The new alliance is governed by two committees: an executive committee and an advisory committee.

Both now have about 12 to 14 members, said Choboy, who also is a member of both the CWM committee and the Restoration Advisory Board.

Individual environmental groups, generally speaking, he said, “just aren’t really getting the job done.”

A calendar of upcoming events can be found on the group’s Web site, www.had-e-nuff.com.

The first event, a free public forum titled “What Is a Watershed? How Does It Affect Me?” is scheduled for 10 a. m. Saturday on the fourth floor of Niagara University’s St. Vincent’s Hall in Lewiston.

Niagara Watershed Alliance representatives said they plan a public education campaign that will include more of these types of forums.

Membership in the group is open to anyone. No membership fees are planned.

Aside from Burmaster, elected leaders who are part of the group include Youngstown Mayor Neil C. Riordan, Lewiston Supervisor Fred M. Newlin and Niagara Falls Mayor Paul A. Dyster.

The Tuscarora Environment Program and the Niagara County Health Department also are participating.

While local support has been strong, Choboy said the group hopes the area's federal representatives "get a little more involved than they have been."

Vince Agnello, a Porter resident and former head of Residents for Responsible Government, a Porter-based organization, said the Niagara Watershed Alliance hopes to network with all environmental groups in the areas that surround the Great Lakes on both sides of the border.

Agnello pointed to a report by the International Joint Commission, the governing body for boundary waters between the United States and Canada, which calls for eliminating all waste discharges into Great Lakes system waters.

"We need to protect the Great Lakes basin," he said.

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