



NIAGARA COUNTY: Watershed Alliance members want action from lawmakers

By Mark Scheer
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 The Tonawanda News

October 09, 2009 11:31 pm

— Some members of a local environmental group are taking federal officials to task for failing to address their concerns about the handling and storage of hazardous waste materials in Niagara County. In response, federal officials who were targeted by the criticism insist they've done plenty to support county residents as they work to address contamination at areas like the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site in Lewiston.

"The federal government has not looked into this situation the way we feel it should have," said Bill Choboy, a representative from the Niagara Watershed Alliance, a group formed earlier this year to raise public awareness about the impact of hazardous and radioactive waste on the Great Lakes region.

The alliance issued a statement Friday announcing it intends to hold "non-responsive elected officials accountable" for what the group describes as a lack of attention to community concerns about hazardous waste sites, including LOOW and the Chemical Waste Management landfill in the Town of Porter.

In its statement, the alliance questioned the lack of response to their requests for assistance from U.S. Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer and U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport. The group claims all three failed to respond to letters seeking help that were delivered in July. The group is seeking support on various issues, including one of its main concerns, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' decision to cut ties with the LOOW Restoration Advisory Board.

"The Niagara Watershed Alliance is concerned that without assistance from federal officials the Niagara Watershed and Great Lakes region will continue to be affected by the runoff and leakage from stored and transported hazardous, chemical and radioactive waste sites," the statement read. "Failure to address these concerns endangers the health and safety of more than 7 million people."

The 191-acre LOOW property once housed a TNT manufacturing plant for the nation's armed forces during and after World War II. The site also was used for other weapons production and still houses radiological wastes created during the Manhattan Project. Numerous cleanups of the area have been attempted over the past several decades by federal agencies and departments.

RAB was created several years ago to provide community input on issues related to the ongoing investigation of contamination at the site. The Army Corps of Engineers has refused to recognize RAB as an official entity, which has angered not only members but some elected officials. A resolution was approved countywide earlier this year calling upon the Corps to change its stance and begin talks with existing RAB members.

In March, following a meeting about the LOOW site with local elected officials, Schumer aide Laura Monte offered to draft a letter to U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in hopes of encouraging intervention and a change in Department of Defense rules for recognizing groups like the RAB.

The alliance statement caught at one least local official who has long supported efforts to clean up the LOOW site off guard. Town of Lewiston Supervisor Fred Newlin believes all three federal officials have been supportive of the community when it comes to this issue. He noted Slaughter recently worked to secure \$1.34 million to support a clean up effort at the LOOW site, a key piece of funding for the overall project.

"To say they are not responsive is not accurate from my perspective," Newlin said.

On Friday, representatives from all three federal offices insisted the community has received and will continue to receive their full support.

Schumer spokesperson Max Young said his boss has been with the community on this issue "every step of the

way” and is “watching the Army Corps like a hawk.”

“We have worked with the entire community and have repeatedly responded to the elected officials and community leaders who wrote this letter,” Young said. “It is hard to understand why someone put out this factually inaccurate release, unless they were not up on the latest developments on this issue.”

Bethany Lesser, a spokesperson for Gillibrand, said the senator has been engaged with the alliance, including during several recent public hearings on waste issues.

“While this is a complex issue that may not be resolved quickly, Sen. Gillibrand’s office will continue to work with the community and groups to be effective where possible and expedite the cleanup of these contaminated sites,” Lesser said.

Slaughter spokesperson Victoria Dillon said the congresswoman has been actively engaged in LOOW talks as well, saying Slaughter has been in frequent contact with Niagara County lawmaker Clyde Burmaster about the issue and told him during the first week of September to expect the Defense Department and Army Corps to complete a response to the community’s concerns in the coming weeks.

Contact reporter Mark Scheer at 282-2311, ext. 2250

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