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**BY RICHARD E. BALDWIN - NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER**

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Lt. Col. Stephen H. Bales, in one of his last actions as commander of the Buffalo District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, "has decided not to establish an official Department of Defense Restoration Advisory Board for the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site," according to an announcement from the district headquarters.

Questions about a Restoration Advisory Board for the government's former munitions plant at the Lewiston-Porter town line have perplexed local residents for years.

Some municipal governments and residents of the Lewiston-Porter area insist that a Restoration Advisory Board already is functioning and that there is no need to create a new one. Others believe that the board, established in 1999 to foster communication between the federal government and local interests, was dissolved by the Corps of Engineers in 2002 with little or no notice to the parties involved.

While some stakeholders strongly support the continuation of the 1999 board, others believe a new board should be established, and some say no board is needed at all. These sharp differences of opinion sometimes have led to controversy, and even confusion, over who -- if anybody -- actually represents the citizens' concerns about the future of the former munitions plant.

In an effort to smooth out the differences, Bales sent an open letter to the community, asking for comment on whether a new board should be established. The law requires that such an inquiry be made every two years if there is no government-recognized Restoration Advisory Board.

"After careful consideration of the input and information received" in response to his letter, Bales decided in mid-June not to establish -- or re-establish -- such a board, according to Arleen K. Kreusch, outreach program specialist for the Corps of Engineers Environmental Management Team in Buffalo.

Bruce Sanders, public affairs spokesman in Buffalo for the Corps of Engineers, said the decision "means that the Buffalo District will continue to sponsor periodic poster or availability sessions for the former LOOW site to inform and to receive input from community members."

The decision was one of Bales' last in his role as commander of the Buffalo District. Bales has been re-assigned, and Lt. Col. Owen J. Beaudoin took command of the district during a ceremony June 21 in the Connecticut Street Armory. The change of command was a routine matter unrelated to issues involving the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, Sanders said.

Beaudoin has served in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa, among many other assignments during his 18-year career in the Army.

In a message sent recently to interested parties, Kreusch wrote that Bales had "thoroughly reviewed the input and information received" in response to the letter asking for comment.

"Within the impacted community of over 23,000 citizens, we received 11 letters from community members in response to our solicitation of interest," Kreusch wrote. "Based on the input received, there is not sufficient and sustained community interest in the formation of an official" Department of Defense Restoration Advisory Board.

Besides the 11 replies from community residents, the Corps received seven replies from public officials and government agencies, one from a labor union and one from a neighboring business.

Copies of the citizens' replies, with the writers' names blacked out, were distributed by the Corps.

Typical among them was one that said, "Please keep the community members on the [Restoration Advisory Board] for Lew-Port area. I think the Army Corps is manipulating the outcome of the LOOW cleanup by trying to exclude qualified members of the local community. These people have worked hard to cooperate and protect our interests. I would like all the radioactive material removed."

Another writer said, "Please certify the present [1999] RAB as the official DOD RAB with the same members. They are the best people for the job and the ones the community can trust."

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Yet another wrote that the need for such a "committee is not clear to me. The public is being completely informed about Corps activities by regular informational meetings (including an open question-and-answer period), by documents placed in the Lewiston and Youngstown public libraries and by emails to specifically interested parties. A new committee formation would not improve this communication process. The public is better served when property owners within the site approach the Corps directly. An intermediate committee would be neither helpful nor necessary."

A Youngstown resident wrote that a new group called a Community Advisory Council has been established to deal with a small section of the former ordnance works. "I have found that the two groups, CAC and RAB, are at a disagreement with each other, it is turning into a he-said, she-said, mud-slinging crossfire, and now that a new RAB is coming into the picture [it] makes it look like it's going to turn into a three-ring circus. At this time I would like to dismiss myself from these activities. Please remove my email and regular mail from your list."

State Sen. George D. Maziarz, R-Newfane, who represents the area, said he recognized that "the relationship between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the community is strained and even contentious. Neither the Corps nor the community can afford another ineffective or unsatisfactory Restoration Advisory Board in this context."

Maziarz offered the services of the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution to mediate differences within the community and said, "I want to see a robust and constructive Restoration Advisory Board established."

Robert W. Schick, acting director of the Division of Environmental Remediation in the state Department of Environmental Conservation, reviewed some of the history of community involvement at the former ordnance works.

"In 1999, the Corps created a Restoration Advisory Board for the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works," he wrote. "However, due to the Corps' assessment that the RAB was ineffective, they dissolved it in 2002. The public members of the former RAB reconstituted the group without the involvement of the Corps in 2003. Therefore, while the Corps has not recognized the existence of this group since that time, the Department [of Environmental Conservation] has continued to participate in this effort, and it has provided a worthwhile avenue for public involvement. The Department supports the Corps proposal to reconstitute a RAB for the LOOW."

The Niagara County Legislature has adopted a resolution that "does not support steps to form a new RAB that would only replace the existing organization." It said, "There is an existing RAB, which the Niagara County Legislature has continued to recognize and support."

Youngstown Mayor Raleigh B. Reynolds said, "There is an existing RAB, which we recognize and support, [and] we do not support steps to form a new RAB to replace the existing RAB."

Michael D. Mahar, district manager of Waste Management, a disposal site adjacent to the former ordnance works, wrote that present methods of communication "are efficient, effective, and there is no need to establish an official Department of Defense Restoration Advisory Board. However, if such a group should be formed, Waste Management would participate in it."

Work on highly toxic explosives for World War II bombs and radioactive nuclear components for the atomic bomb was conducted at the former ordnance works, and some of the contaminated residue remains there, particularly in a former underground basement now called an Interim Waste Containment Structure, or the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

The government is considering what to do with the contamination: leave it sealed in place, move it to a permanent disposal site in another state or some other action between those two extremes.

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