

METROPOLITAN NEWS

U.S. plan unlikely to quiet debate on cleanup

Tonawanda officials chart own path on sites with low-level radioactive debris

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The U.S. Energy Department has completed studies of several radioactive sites in the Town of Tonawanda and will release a proposed plan for the cleanup by early fall.

But local reaction suggests the government might have a hard sell ahead when time comes for public hearings on the plan.

The Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda, or CANIT, a group of local officials who have joined forces on this issue, plan to meet within the next few weeks, said Tonawanda Supervisor Carl Calabrese.

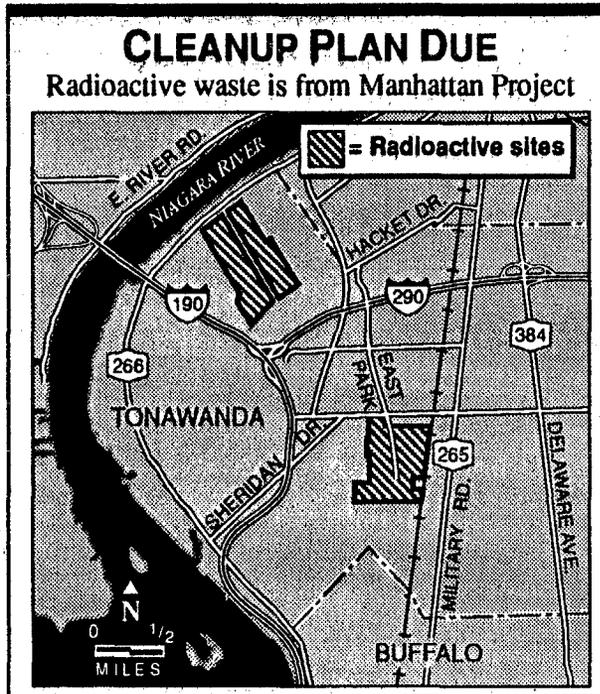
"It is timely that CANIT make a decision on what it wants to do. We don't have to agree with (the Energy Department)," said County Legislator Charles Swanick, D-Kenmore, a CANIT member.

The Energy Department's information office in the Town of Tonawanda has been holding public information sessions on the alternatives under consideration for the cleanup.

The government has found about 350,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and sediments at Linde Air Products on East Park Drive and at two locations at the former Ashland Oil refinery and the Seaway Industrial Landfill, where the waste was taken.

From 1942 to 1946, the Linde plant processed uranium ore for the Manhattan Project, which made the first atomic bombs.

The low-level radioactive residue at the plant gives off alpha particles, which can cause cell damage when ingested and after long-term exposure. Unlike stronger beta particles or gamma rays, alpha particles cannot penetrate the skin. A single sheet of paper can stop alpha particles, while steel or lead are needed to stop gamma rays.



DOE maintains that because of the low level of radioactivity, the Tonawanda sites do not pose an immediate health or environmental risk.

"Unless disturbed, they pose no threat," said Ron Kirk, DOE site manager at Tonawanda. "We're trying to clean it up because we can't guarantee it won't be disturbed in the next 50 years."

Ralph Krieger, president of Local 8215, Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, is not impressed with the government study.

Krieger has lost numerous Linde colleagues, including two brothers, to cancer. "The Linde site is

contaminated far beyond what they are telling the public," Krieger argues.

He points to a pile of rubble from when Linde Building 19 was torn down last year. It remains in a pile and uncovered, and he said some of it could be contaminated. He thinks utility tunnels at Linde should be tested as well.

Krieger also says he believes Two Mile Creek, which runs off of the Linde property, is contaminated.

Kirk said the creek has been tested and to date is safe by government standards for radioactivity.

DOE is exploring the option of either partially or fully excavating the contaminated soil, Kirk said.

Partial excavation would remove the radioactive waste at the Linde and Ashland sites, but would leave in place some of the contaminated soil at the Seaway Landfill, which is buried under 40 feet of garbage.

The government will then have to dispose of the materials either on site or elsewhere. Government documents say off-site disposal will take longer to implement and could entail transportation risks.

Off-site disposal will also involve finding a site willing to take the waste.

The cost of the different alternatives range from \$59 million for a partial excavation with on-site storage, to up to \$300 million for complete excavation with off-site disposal.

Swanick met with Conrail officials last week to get direct information on the costs of transporting the waste out of the area.

"We are reviewing a number of options," he said. "DOE is still promoting on-site disposal. We're a little suspect on their figures."

After DOE's proposal is released, a public hearing and a 45-day period of public comment will follow. The government will have to respond to all comments before proceeding with the cleanup, Kirk said.