

Tonawanda has its concerns over nuclear landfill clean up

By Joelle Gresock
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The removal of nuclear materials from the Ashland landfills in Tonawanda is proving controversial.

Members of the Tonawanda General Environmental Control Board met with the common council Tuesday to air concerns that excavation of the material, used for atomic bomb experimentation, will be inadequate if done according to specifications provided by federal authorities.

Board Chairman William Watson said he has concerns regarding the clean-up proposal.

The material was generated by at the former Linde Air products Division of Union Carbide. The factory processed uranium ore in the 1940s to be used for research into refining bomb-grade uranium for the Manhattan Engineering District. Processing wastes were taken from Linde to a 10-acre site known as Ashland 1. These wastes were moved between 1974 and 1982 to the adjacent Ashland 2 site.

Waste from Ashland 1 and Ashland 2 sites off River Road will be removed and transported to a western disposal area. Excavation is expected to begin in June by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, that released a formal adoption of the clean-up plan in a "Record of Decision."

The Corps took over the project a few years ago from the Department of Energy which spent more than a decade and several million dollars determining that it could not find a cost-effective decision acceptable to the community.

Only about 42,000 cubic feet of waste will be removed from the two sites that contain more than 170,000 cubic feet of contaminants.

"Only a small fraction of the contaminants are going to be removed," he said. "I am in favor of cleaning up, but it depends on how. Why do a bad job? Why not get all the contaminants up?"

One of several items in the agreement Environmental Control Board members are dismayed about are the non-removal of chemicals from the Niagara Landfill that was non-operational beginning in 1993.

Efforts will include clean-up at the two Ashland sites and at other

contaminated zone know as the Niagara Landfill that sits directly between the two sites.

"You do something to address one and two but not the Niagara Landfill," Mr. Watson said. "Niagara is more of a problem."

He said the Niagara Landfill contains methane producing garbage and radon. Because the methane needs to be "vented" to prevent explosion, a regular clay cap is not an option. Operators of the site Browning Ferris Industries installed a cap with a series of extraction wells. The site contains about 10 million cubic yards of solid waste and 117,000 cubic yards of soil that has concentrated of radium up to five times that found in natural soil.

Mr. Watson said quantities of deadly radon gas are not being removed from the Niagara Landfill site.

"The Niagara Landfill is the only site where capping will not contain the emission of deadly radon gas," he said. "Radon is blown by the prevailing south-westerly winds over the City of Tonawanda... the only way to prevent the radon emission is to remove the radium that is producing the radon gas."

He said the Ashland sites are "secondary" and that the Niagara Landfill should be priority.

Mr. Watson said the guidelines used for measuring hazardous chemicals at all the sites are questionable. Federal legislation says 15 picocuries of radon doesn't pose a health risk. The board disputes that limit. They suggested using 5 picocuries as a limit. The radon levels at the Niagara Landfill remained unchanged at 175 to 194 picocuries. Information released by the state Department of Environmental Conservation indicated the levels are not unusually high.

Radon, even in smallest form, can penetrate the lungs and cause cancer, according to a report by the Environmental Protection Agency. Radon-related deaths such as lung cancer account for about 14,000 deaths annually.

The council is expected to continue discussion on the proposed clean-up. They also suggested conducting off-site testing.

The removal of the waste is being funded through a federal grant.