

OUR VIEW

Army Corps wrong on landfill

Was it any surprise that the Army Corps of Engineers is trying to lowball the Town of Tonawanda on the issue of radioactive waste in the Seaway landfill off the 190?

The corps has time and again, on a multitude of projects, lobbied on behalf of the most cost-effective environmental remediation measures possible. It's almost a given these days that if there are two options, the Army Corps is in favor of the one that will provide the smallest hit to its bottom line.

We're all for judicious spending and would never encourage a government entity to spend more than it needs to on a given project, but considering this region's tragic legacy of Love Canal, erring on the side of caution is the best policy. Yes, even if that means it costs more.

Engineers from the corps presented three options during a public hearing last week. The first would be the removal of all radioactive substances in the landfill and their cross-country shipment to a radioactive waste storage facility. It would cost about \$130 million — a significant amount of money to be sure.

A second, middle-of-the-road option would have some of the material removed (anything that's less than 10 feet underground or outside the landfill's boundary) with the remainder left there and capped. This would cost \$80 million.

The third option, which costs the least and is backed by the Army Corps, would remove only a minimum of the radioactive material in question and rely on the landfill cap to prevent any seepage into groundwater and surrounding properties.

Here's what we know: All landfill caps will breach eventually — like anything else, they won't last forever. It might not be for 100 years, but it's a question of when, not if. When that happens, residents and surrounding businesses in the town will be affected. Depending on how badly, it could cost those tasked with cleaning it up far more than the preventative \$130 million it would take to clear the land of radioactive waste.

It's the prudent choice, and the cost shouldn't be a concern when public health is a question. "Good enough" isn't a good enough option.

OPINIONS

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The Tonawanda News prints letters and "guest view" columns on issues of public concern. Letters should be typed and no longer than 400 words; guest views, 700 words.

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City charter revisions are common sense

Revisions to the North Tonawanda City Charter will be put before voters in a few weeks and if my experience covering local government is any basis to judge, they all seem to make sense.

A brief review of those proposed changes, which will appear on the ballot in the form of five separate propositions, are:

- Converting the city attorney's office from an elected position to one appointed by the mayor, subject to the Common Council's approval.

- Abolishing the elected position of city clerk and combine those duties with that of the elected city treasurer. The holder of the new clerk-treasurer position would be decided by an election in 2010.

- Allowing city residents to sue over enforcement of the charter, with legal fees reimbursed by the city, should they be successful in court.

- Granting the mayor the authority to appoint the city accountant, a non-elected position. This is an oversight in the existing city charter, as amended in 1999.

- Prohibiting the city attorney from providing legal representation to an elected official in North Tonawanda city government against another elected official during a legal dispute.

appointed and banning him from representing one arm of city government against another in court.

First, the vast majority of municipal attorneys are appointed. It works elsewhere without issue and there's no reason it can't work here. The city attorney is supposed to defend taxpayers, not politicians. When the attorney has to run for office — and align himself with one party or the other — it creates an inherent me-versus-them mindset once in office. By converting the candidate to one that both the mayor and council must agree is fit to serve, you take away the possibility that they are going to act in a partisan way.

And let's be honest, when the attorney and council are suing, the mayor, all governance turns into a sideshow. NT politics has been a sideshow for far too long and this will help prevent it in the future.

Combining the clerk and treasurer into a single office. Again, many municipalities have a combined clerk/treasurer. Most are villages, but given North Tonawanda's ever-shrinking population, our numbers aren't much larger than some of that biggest villages in New York where this system is used.

These two offices — arguably the most essential for an efficient and resident-responsive government — can easily be overseen by a single individual. It's going to mean more work for some people and fewer jobs available in City Hall. While it's understandable that there are people in city government who...

We're all doing more with less in the private sector. Government shouldn't be any different.

Granting the mayor power to appoint the accountant.

If anyone votes no on it, they simply don't understand what this whole thing is about. And it'll provide an interesting litmus test on Election Day. Just how many people out there are against these charter revisions lock, stock and barrel — and most assuredly out of some political motive? We'll be able to tell based on how many no-votes this specific proposition gets because there's no valid reason not to approve it other than politics.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly:

City residents will now be able to sue over charter changes and have the city pick up the bill if they win.

It's a stridently populist approach to government. It has the potential to provide NT taxpayers with a direct means for a redress of grievances. It also opens the door to the possibility of party-backed legal challenges to just about anyone in city government if used improperly.

But to my mind, anything that grants average citizens a more direct route to government reform is a good thing. And based on the way some things have been handled around here lately, I can't see how anyone could concoct grounds to argue in favor of less accountability.

Managing Editor Eric DuVall's

SOUND OFF

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Once again Niagara County is designated as the highest taxed county in the country and we, as the foolish people who live in this county, are going to re-elect the same incumbents by landslide back into office. My bet here is Maziarz, Schimminger, DeMonte will all be re-elected because we like to be the highest-taxed county in the country.

For all you Republicans for Palin, I have one question: If something happened to McCain before the election and he had to pull out of his presidential run, would you still vote for and have confidence in Palin as your president for the next four years?

For all the trouble that President Bush has caused this country and the debt he has created during his term in office, should we put faith in what he says about Wall Street, or is he trying to get this country further into trouble than it is now?

This government bailout: Could this be a cover-up so that President Bush and his friends can take care of their buddies on Wall Street, so that their portfolios don't turn to dust and lose everything they stole from the taxpayers and investments that they shouldn't have had?

I see where NT received a grant to help low-income homeowners to help with repairs on their homes. Why hasn't the City of Tonawanda gotten anything like this? I certainly could use the help, so could senior citizens and others.

This congressional crisis on TV keeps sounding more and more like the senators and congressmen are only worried about their own 401Ks and their own savings. They're only trying to protect their own pocketbook. It doesn't seem like they're trying to do anything to protect the middle class or the poor little guy.

All Sound Off comments must be issue-oriented. Comments relating to specific public figures will be printed, but only insofar as they relate to matters previously reported. All