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LANDFILL: Cleanup may become political issue

By Dave Hill/hilld@gnewsnewspaper.com

The Town of Tonawanda landfill runs along a number of homes in the City of Tonawanda, drastically affecting residents of Hackett Drive and Brookside Terrace, many of whom are concerned — if not fearful — of just what is in the landfill.

But cleanup of the uranium ore waste buried within it is not an issue that rests solely on the desk of the city's 4th Ward councilman, whether it is incumbent Rick Davis or challenger David McCormick.

Given that the outcome of the remediation process — a key step of which is now in the hands of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — could impact property values, and the fact that residents' health is at stake, the landfill is a city-wide issue.

With voters heading to the polls Nov. 6 to elect four council members and a council president, the Tonawanda News asked each candidate to share his or her views on the landfill situation. All agree something needs to be done, but there's a prevailing view among city Republicans that their Democratic counterparts have made the issue a political one.

Incumbent Colleen Perkins, 1st Ward, knows all about cleaning up hazardous sites. Gastown is in her ward, and the state Department of Environmental Conservation is in the process of remediating that site. She says the landfill has to be handled differently from Gastown, and the current common council has done the right thing in raising much public awareness of what developments are taking place there.

Her Republican challenger, Jerry Frizzell, admits that because he hasn't sat on the council he is not as well versed in the city's landfill remediation efforts. However, he did say that proper testing needs to be done on the site, and that the city must "keep our citizens safe, whatever it takes." Frizzell added that Tonawanda might want to consider involving its legal department to accelerate remediation.

"I think it's become too political," 2nd Ward Councilman Blake Boyle said of the issue. Boyle has said at meetings that he does not believe residents could not have been aware of the uranium ore in the landfill when they bought their homes.

"I grew up in the Town (of Tonawanda) and I knew it was a landfill," Boyle said. He said the city should not pursue filing a lawsuit against the town, that the two municipalities need to work together toward a resolution.

Gary Waterhouse, the Democratic challenger in the 2nd Ward, said the city has "some tough times ahead and we need some strong people to handle those." Waterhouse believes it's important to keep the

pressure on both the Army Corps of Engineers and the state DEC.

“It’s a city issue,” he said. “Everybody should be involved in that.”

Waterhouse says the city should “take it up a notch” and “turn up the heat” on congressional representatives who can sway the Army Corps’ final decision.

“Every day this goes on is another day somebody could be exposed to a hazardous chemical,” he said.

In the 3rd Ward, incumbent James Kossow said the city is “united” in its efforts, and he also feels Tonawanda can put more pressure on the Army Corps and the Town of Tonawanda. His Republican challenger, Amy Fleming, could not be reached to comment.

In the landfill’s home district, Rick Davis has been in constant contact with state and federal officials on all fronts of the issue. Most recently, Davis reached out to Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, asking her to use her clout to get the Environmental Protection Agency to come to Tonawanda to test both the properties of residents who live near the landfill and the grounds of the nearby Riverview Elementary School.

“The landfill has been a sore spot with residents in the 4th Ward since closure work began three years ago,” Davis said. “This is something that affects everyone in the city. If property values decrease due to homes suffering structural damage from work being done at the landfill or the stigma that is attached to those properties for being in proximity, everyone in the city will have to pay more in taxes to make up the difference.”

David McCormick, who is challenging Davis on the common council, is among those who have criticized Davis and Council President Carleton Zeisz for playing politics with the landfill. He says that Zeisz and Davis performed a political stunt when they canvassed the Riverview Heights neighborhood a few weeks ago to get signatures for a letter to the Army Corps.

“To hear a politician screaming this landfill is causing cancer — that’s not right,” McCormick said. “Don’t put the cart before the horse.”

He said certain councilmen didn’t go about it right. He did stress that if there is contamination, “of course take care of it.”

As for council president candidate Zeisz, the incumbent, said the city has “tried different avenues and we’re not getting the response we need to get.”

As such, Tonawanda officials are going to keep pushing the Army Corps to get the federal government to clean up the radioactive waste material. Zeisz believes it will take some type of congressional intervention to get the Corps to take responsibility for the remediation. He said additional groundwater, ventilation and yard testing will have to be conducted.

Brian Grassia, the Republican running against Zeisz, says that the common council should have passed a unanimous resolution, with Mayor Ron Pillozzi, calling for the removal of radioactive waste. Zeisz said the council did that in February. Grassia said that sending the Army Corps a resolution from the council

along with residents' signatures would have carried more weight. "Instead, they (Zeisz and Davis) performed a political stunt with going around getting some signatures."

Contact reporter David J. Hill at 693-1000, ext. 115.