

Feds approach decision time on radioactive cleanup plan

by PATRICK KEYES

It's getting close to decision time on what to do with the four major radioactive waste sites in the Town of Tonawanda.

Ronald E. Kirk, site manager for the U.S. Department of Energy in the local Formerly Utilized Site Remedial Action Program, said his final recommendation on how to treat the sites — Linde, Seaway (BFI landfill) and Ashland 1 and 2 — will be announced in early November, with a public meeting on the topic to be held later that month.

The original schedule was to release the plan last week and have the meeting at the end of September. However, the Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda (CANIT) has some

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Ronald Kirk, project manager for the cleanup of the radioactive sites in Tonawanda, explains the options being explored by the Department of Energy.

Photo by John Rusac

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questions about the cost involved in transporting the waste out of the area.

Still, Kirk said the DOE's decision process has already in effect delayed the final plan. Since the local sites are not on the recently changed national priority list, the process was allowed to lapse in Tonawanda.

That is not for a lack of effort by Kirk and his staff, now based on Sheridan Drive near the Sheridan Park Fire Hall. He has been working on the cleanup of the four sites in Tonawanda for six years, adding that determining what to do with 350,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil is not a quick process. The average FUSRAP process is five to seven years long.

Kirk said that thorium is the radioactive element which is pushing the cleanup's pace. Its level is above the acceptable level here, although the Curie inventory, a scale used to measure levels of radioactivity, is much lower here than at many more prioritized sites. Kirk said the Curie level is in the hundreds here, as opposed to thousands or millions in other areas.

Levels of Uranium and Radium are acceptable at the sites, Kirk added. Now, the questions remain as to which option for closure of the sites will be chosen.

The choices will come from six plans: no action; complete excavation with on-site and off-site disposal; partial excavation with on-site and off-site excavation; and containment.

"Our main criteria for this deci-

sion is the best degree of protection," Kirk said. "That is still a subjective thing, but we generally feel better with government controls on the plan."

Looking at a table that lists results of analysis done at the sites, costs of the plans range from \$3.6 million for no action (because of monitoring costs) to up to \$300 million for complete excavation with off-site disposal at a western site.

By the table, complete and partial excavations with on-site disposal appear to be the best options based on cost and level of protection. Both offer protective ratings, solid short term effectiveness and can be implemented with existing technology and materials.

That complete excavation cost would be nearly \$75 million, while partial excavation with on-site disposal would cost roughly \$59 million. The cost difference is for digging up the contaminated materials at the Seaway site, where it is already sufficiently buried for protection if not disturbed.

On-site disposal would be in a

complex clay cell enclosed in a fenced area. Off-site disposal could be at places in New York or elsewhere; Kirk said the DOE is hoping to open some disposal areas out west in the next couple of years.

Whatever decision is made and handed to Washington, D.C. for analysis and approval, it will also be the subject of a 45-day public comment period. That will be highlighted by a public meeting in which several comments from residents and local officials are expected.

Kirk said turnout at information hearings held at the office at 810 Sheridan Drive has been steady. "It's natural for people to fear what they don't know, and more people are continually becoming more knowledgeable," he added.

There are numerous effects involved in the study, including economic, but Kirk said the cost of the plan is not the key determination. It is how to best protect the people who live here and do it in a cost-effective manner.