

Waste dispute heats up in Tonawanda

Agency accused of trying to mediate storage fight

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Is the federal government looking for a mediator to help settle a long-running dispute over where to store radioactive waste permanently in the Town of Tonawanda?

Some Erie County and Town of Tonawanda officials think so. They accuse the U.S. Department of Energy of quietly seeking local mediators to help resolve a conflict with the Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda (CANIT), a group of elected officials.

But an Energy Department official said the government has merely been researching local groups that can provide an impartial person to run sometimes-contentious public meetings.

At the root of the issue is mounting local distrust of the Energy Department over the disposal of 8,000 tons of radioactive waste from the atomic bomb project in the 1940s, now located at four sites in the town.

The Energy Department originally proposed consolidating all the waste at a site on River Road. The local community wants the waste taken to a disposal site in Utah, which was first rejected by the federal government because of the cost. The final decision was delayed and since then both sides have been struggling to figure out what happens next.

Tonawanda Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese said a local mediator told him that the Energy Department asked for a proposal for mediation services. Legislator Charles M. Swanick, D-Kenmore, said he also heard from someone approached by the department.

But department project manager Ronald E. Kirk said no such plan is under way.

He said that no mediator was being sought and no requests for proposals had been sent out. He said the department was merely looking for a local facilitator, an independent person who can lead a public meeting and make sure that no one side dominates.

He also noted that no meetings on the issue are planned for the near future. No discussions will likely take place until results are back this spring from tests to determine if new technologies can reduce the amount of waste. Only then can all the options available be discussed, he said.

Swanick and Calabrese were already angered by a meeting last month in which the Energy Department proposed creating a stakeholder group to discuss cleanup alternatives. Both felt it was a waste of time and that the department should deal with the elected officials in CANIT, which has followed the nuclear waste issue in town for many years.

Kirk said he was not surprised that CANIT was upset. But he said by law, the department has to contact the public directly as well.

"CANIT is certainly part of the process," Kirk said. "We think they're only one element of the process. Politicians are not the only route of access to the community."

In protest of the Oct. 18 meeting and the perception that a mediator is being sought, Calabrese and Swanick have written to Admiral Richard Guimond, a high-ranking Energy Department official who visited Tonawanda this past summer.

"After listening to the DOE's presentation, we can not help but conclude that it has lost sight of the new direction you helped establish this past summer," the letter stated. It urges Guimond to "return the focus to finding a way to rid the community of this nuclear waste."