

FEBRUARY 5, 1995

Town residents, officials go nuclear over waste

No compromise found with DOE

By GREG MURPHY
Metro Staff Reporter

"Get the material out."

This was the emphatic consensus that residents and officials of the Town of Tonawanda reached last Tuesday evening in their meeting with United States Department of Energy (DOE) officials at Holmes Elementary School. The message was delivered to Ron Kirk, the DOE site manager for the Tonawanda nuclear waste, and those issuing that statement were hopeful that Kirk would, in turn, deliver it to his superiors in Washington D.C.

The nuclear waste at issue is residual uranium, radium and thorium, which is a legacy of the Manhattan Project, a federal endeavor which produced the world's first three nuclear weapons. Currently the waste covers 351,000 cubic yards of town property over four sites—three on parcels of land near the Niagara River and the other on the property of Praxair, Inc., on East Park Drive, which was formerly owned by Union Carbide's Linde Division.

For the last six years, residents and CANIT (the Coalition Against Nuclear Waste in Tonawanda)—a bipartisan group of elected government leaders—have been struggling with the DOE to find a new depository for this waste.

The DOE carried out an extensive study of the situation to determine what the federal government's best course of action would be. The conclusion that the DOE arrived at last January was to consolidate



ALBERT T. McCracken Jr. Metro

Ron Kirk, the Department of Energy Site Manager, listens to a question posed by a concerned resident at the Holmes School meeting last Tuesday evening.

the waste into one new depository near the Niagara River at a cost of \$59 million.

This decision outraged the people of Tonawanda, who were not willing to accept anything less than a complete removal of the waste from the town. The DOE, however, estimated that this type of remediation carried along a \$200 million price tag, a figure that the federal government could not accommodate.

This is how the situation stands today—at a veritable impasse. In an attempt to move toward a solution, or at

least renew dialogue, the DOE held a meeting with residents and officials at Holmes Elementary School on Dupont Avenue last Tuesday evening.

Dialogue was indeed renewed, but both sides seemed to be only reiterating a stance formed long ago.

"I have not seen the community change its perception on the removal of this waste," said Erie County Legislator Charles M. Swanick (D-Kenmore, Tonawanda). "What kind of documentation, verbal communication or show of hands do you need

to convince you that the community has spoken and will continue to speak with the same voice—that we want the material removed?"

"The DOE said that we're not going to make a \$200 million solution," replied Kirk. "We want to talk to the community and see if we can reach some common ground."

Instead of finding common ground, however, it was clear from the outset that neither side was willing to give any ground.

Kirk struck a strong cord with the audience when he suggested that the community was not adequately represented at the meeting. He said that about 3,200 fliers on this forum were distributed, while only about 100 people attended.

"This town board supports unanimously the removal of this material from this town," Town Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese angrily retorted, "but we are at an impasse with you people—you do not hear us."

Calabrese and Swanick also pointed to the delay caused in waterfront development by the presence of this waste. The area along River Road represents the town's last undeveloped frontier for recreational access, new residences or industrial expansion, but developers are understandably repulsed by the waste.

"We want this material out," Calabrese added. "Every other polluted site on our waterfront is being cleaned up by the responsible parties. The only party not making progress is the federal government. The town board has had it; the residents have had it—get it out."

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Murphy's Law

By GREG MURPHY

Being an aficionado of the Second World War, I like to seize any chance to work some facts from this great conflagration into the articles I produce every week.

For example, last year I was able to tie in stories of World War II veterans with Memorial Day and D-Day ceremonies. Unfortunately, precious little of the local news has anything to do with this particular era.

Then there's the saga of Tonawanda's nuclear waste.

This should be a shining moment in town history—an obscure northeastern waterfront municipality is chosen to be an integral part of the Manhattan Project, the monumental nationwide effort to produce an atomic bomb, before our mortal enemies did. Of course, the work eventually paid off, as Japan succumbed to this power.

Unfortunately, the speed and urgency of the project at



the time left little time to spare for "petty" details such as waste disposal. Some 351,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with radioactive materials became Tonawanda's legacy—a proud niche in world history had turned instead into a horrible nightmare.

Apparently, the federal government is satisfied with nuclear waste being buried along the Niagara River. At least that's how I understood the DOE's attitude at Holmes Elementary School last Tuesday evening.

Did it ever occur to the DOE that millions of people in the United States and Canada rely on this water and that a flood or earthquake could seriously jeopardize this valuable resource? Obviously not, for those in Washington D.C. don't seem to want to deal with reality, something they have demonstrated time and time again.

Instead, they would rather settle the baseball strike. So, while we all suffer with cancer and other maladies, they can relax at the ballpark and laugh at our misfortune.

I only have one question—where is our *re-elected* Congressman John J. LaFalce? His help is desperately needed here.

Waste

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A round of applause from the audience followed Calabrese's remarks. Residents then added their own comments, which included concerns over any effect of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, on a depository near the Niagara River.

Other members of the community attacked the issue of cost. Some felt that \$200 million was only a "drop in the bucket" compared to the federal deficit and the defense budget. Another resident suggested that funds could be diverted from projects such as the Crossroads Arena and put toward those that he felt had more importance.

Town resident Don Finch said that 20 percent of all of the FUSRAP (Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program) waste is in Tonawanda, while DOE has only given the site 8 percent of the funding. Finch, a former employee of Praxair and Linde and one of the founding members of the citizen group FACTS (For a Clean Tonawanda Site), felt that remedying this discrepancy would help finance the waste's exodus.

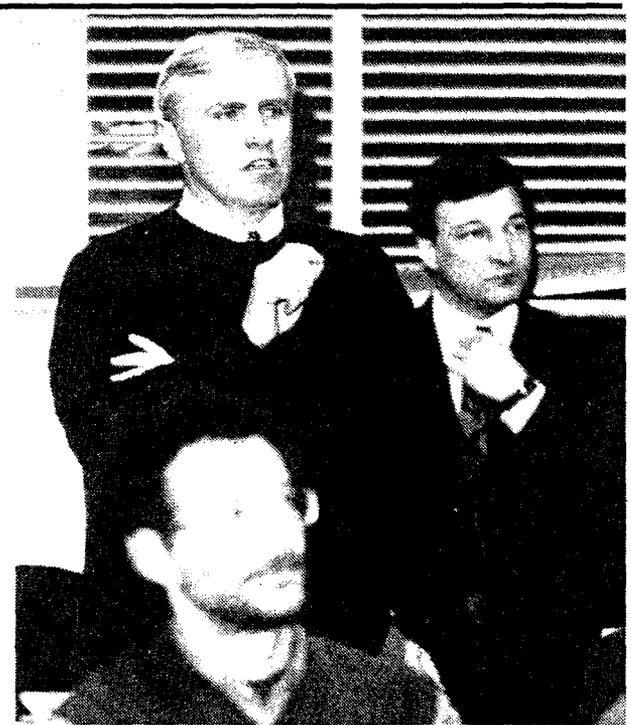
Throughout the meeting, Kirk was hoping that the community would be willing to discuss alternatives, that he said were "equally competitive, but much cheaper." He said that other actions ranged in price from \$10 million to \$200 million, but residents and their government representatives were not willing to stray from the \$200 million option.

"Then I will take that message back to the DOE—that the community is not interested in talking and that the only solution is to ship the material to Utah," Kirk said.

George Melrose, the director of the Land Use and Environment Committee of the Horizons Waterfront Commission, said that nothing had been accomplished at any of the meetings held in the last year and that DOE's message has always been the same.

"You're not making any progress as I can see it," Melrose said. "You've had these discussions before about the alternatives—now it just seems that you're trying to do it all over again."

"The community is getting very frustrated about a process that seems to have no beginning or ending," Cal-



ALBERT T. McCRACKEN, Jr./Metro

At left, Erie County Legislator Charles M. Swanick makes a his thoughts known on the nuclear waste, while Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese awaits his turn in the background.

abrese added, referring to the lengthy feasibility studies of the DOE, the 50 years that the waste has been here and the current impasse. "I believe that we've underestimated the value of leaving the material here and overestimated the cost of removing it."

It appears that DOE is simply going to continue to have these meetings in the hope that the public will eventually lose interest in the issue," Swanick said.

Despite all of the arguing, the meeting did end with one agreement—that the next meeting on the issue will be held on Feb. 28.