

Get this waste out of here

A welcome first step on Manhattan Project mess

IT'S A BIT late, but welcome, that the U.S. Department of Energy will be spending \$14 million to begin cleaning up nuclear contamination in the Town of Tonawanda left over from World War II.

The allocation is not nearly enough to completely clean up four locations where wastes from the famed Manhattan Project have been stored since the 1940s. That would take up to \$200 million.

But it is an important step following the Energy Department's decision of more than a year ago to reassess its earlier, unsatisfactory preference: leaving the low-level nuclear waste in Tonawanda, restored permanently in a clay-capped containment cell along the Niagara River.

The waste — designated as "low-grade uranium ore tailings" — represents the legacy of work by the Linde Air Products Corp. on the development of the atomic bomb during World War II.

How much work would be required to clean up the former Linde industrial sites remains uncertain, an energy official said, until the project starts. But the objective

should be removal of all contamination from these sites and its shipment to Utah for permanent disposal.

The suburban Town of Tonawanda is, after all, a heavily populated area, though it wasn't when Linde helped in the development of the bomb. Town officials and residents had neither knowledge nor input on the secret Manhattan Project.

Obviously, this was a weapon born in a wartime emergency. But responsibility for protecting the health and safety of Americans from toxic consequences of its development belongs exclusively with the federal government, not the town.

A private facility in Utah is willing to take the waste. So federal concerns mostly boil down to matters of expense. A \$200 million cleanup should not be impossible, over time, in a \$1.6 trillion annual budget.

Contributors to residual contamination, including the government, share a heavy responsibility for cleaning up. With the Cold War over, there is more time, more scientific expertise and greater financial resources available to mend past mistakes.