

Metro Community News

Kenmore/Tonawanda Edition

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Nuclear waste to leave Tonawanda Praxair site first to get DOE nod

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The beginning of this month saw three important dates in the history of the atomic age. While Aug. 6 and 9, of course, marked the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, of greater significance to the Town of Tonawanda was a sudden and unexpected decision by the U.S. Department of Energy regarding the nuclear waste deposited on town soil.

The waste is residual radioactive material from the Manhattan Project of the 1940s, which, ironically, produced those bombs. It currently encompasses some 351,000 cubic yards of town property along the Niagara River and in buildings of the Praxair plant, which was formerly owned by the Linde Division of Union Carbide.

The Praxair site is the focus of the DOE decision and they have allocated \$14 million to remove the waste stored there to an out-of-state site and to decontaminate four compromised buildings. Preliminary work is scheduled to begin shortly, but the cleanup efforts won't be in full force until the fall of 1996.

The news was heartily welcomed by local leaders, especially Town Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese.

"We've finally gotten away from studying the problem," Calabrese said, referring to the feasibility studies, reviews and tests that have cost an estimated \$20 million over the past seven

years. "Nothing was ever done to just begin cleanup, but this is a major step forward."

Calabrese was particularly elated because, while the Praxair waste represents only 10 percent of the total waste in volume, it also represents 90 percent of the toxicity. This waste is the "hottest" material, as several of the uranium separation processes occurred there.

"If you had to pick a site, this one would have top priority," Calabrese said. "You're dealing with a very populated site, day in and day out, as opposed to vacant land (the Seaway and Ashland property)."

More than 800 people are currently employed at Praxair.

While the news pleased local officials, Don Finch, a former employee at Linde and Praxair and current editor of "For A Clean Tonawanda Site" newsletter, felt caution should still be exercised.

"What cleanup guidelines will be used to decontaminate the property?" he asked. "If DOE cleanup criteria are used instead of New York's, the 'cleaned' area will still pose a ten-fold greater risk of health effects such as cancers."

Calabrese, too, intends to remain vigilant. He feels that the pressure from the town board and the Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda played a major role in this announcement.

"We plan to continue our persistence until all the waste is gone," Calabrese concluded.