

# We're eager to begin cleanup at Town of Tonawanda N-sites but just how clean will they be?

By LEONORE SCHMITT LAMBERT

Regarding the radioactive waste in the Town of Tonawanda, officials are saying: no more delays, clean it up! Obviously, we should have done that years ago. The question is, what does "clean" mean?

People hear "clean" and think "safe." They hear "low level" and think "low risk." They hear "cleanup," especially when officials say there will be a "complete cleanup," and think the waste will be gone. That is absolutely not true. Not that we should panic, but knowing some facts may help balance some of the rhetoric.

Fact: The Department of Energy's original plan in 1993 included leaving some waste in-ground and exhuming other waste and storing it above ground on Ashland 1 property. There was strong opposition and demand for removal of all the waste from the area.

A complete cleanup would mean that all of Ashland 1 and 2, Seaway Industrial Park, Linde/Praxair and the Town of Tonawanda Landfill would have to meet Nuclear Regulatory Commission standards: no more than 5 picoCuries of radiation per gram of soil (5 pCi/gr). The waste would be shipped out; thereafter, the land would be safe for unrestricted use.

Fact: The current proposal is limited to the riverfront area: Ashland 1 and 2 and Section D of Seaway Industrial Park, which lies between the two Ashland sites. The plan aims at removing only the soils exhibiting more than 40 pCi/gr of Thorium 230, much less "clean" than the original plan.

Fact: Thorium 230 is one of several members of the "decay chain" of Uranium 238. So is Radium 226. As long as the uranium is there, radium will grow, as will radon gas. Eventually the level of radioactivity will rise again beyond the level of 40 pCi/gr. There is disagreement only over how many years that process will take.

Fact: Future use of the land will be limited to industrial or business purposes. Someone will have to enforce that limitation, or years from now a future community is in for a big surprise.

Why has this happened? Why would officials agree to a lesser standard of cleanup? Obviously, citizens who knew about the problem were tired of studies and paper-shuffling and anxious to have their riverfront back and "safe" for use. Officials were anxious to declare victory over the problem and begin the waterfront development plan.

Since the "preferred alternative" did not have support, DOE officials bowed to public fears and political pressure to: break up the plan into segments; use a lesser standard of cleanup; and start with the area next to the Niagara River.

Project managers tell us that breaking up the plan — segmentation

— is not a problem. They say they will address the remainder of Seaway, Linde/Praxair and the Tonawanda Landfill "later."

Seaway Industrial Park Section A waste is on the surface. Section B and C waste is buried under 40 feet of garbage. The garbage must be vented. The radioactive waste might better be left alone.

Since radon gas will be emitted, the Town of Tonawanda School Board has questioned the safety of the venting process because it might impact students in their schools, which are downwind of the site.

Segmenting will mean no monitoring of potentially dangerous cumulative readings from one portion to another. There is also some concern whether the money will be there for those areas to be cleaned up later.

Fact: The cost of the project is estimated at \$38 million. For twice that amount we could have had a total cleanup, had there been sufficient political will and investment in public education. Congress controls the purse. Legislation is often approved, but funding does not follow. The money available this year from the federal Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program is less than \$12 million.

Every year, Rep. John LaFalce will need to get support to include funding for the next phase in the federal budget. Rep. Amo Houghton will have to do the same for the West Valley project, as will all other congressmen near radioactive waste sites, if they have any conscience at all.

Having heard some of the horror stories from other sites, I expect it will be harder in the future to get money for Western New York. I would like to see our local representatives band together with those from all the other sites, particularly Savannah River, Ga.; Rocky Flats, Colo.; Los Alamos, N.M.; Oakridge, Tenn.; and especially Hanford, Wash., to declare a national emergency and spend some of the present surplus to remedy past assaults on the environment.

We need to convince our government that the same type of crash program that created the atomic bomb and the subsequent waste during and since World War II should be immediately undertaken to clean up the radioactive waste mess across the country.

**LEONORE SCHMITT LAMBERT** has closely followed the cleanup plan in West Valley and recently attended a workshop in San Diego, sponsored by the League of Women Voters Education Fund and the Department of Energy, discussing nuclear waste at several sites across the country.

For writer guidelines for columns appearing in this space, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Opinion Pages Guidelines, The Buffalo News, P.O. Box 100, Buffalo, N.Y. 14240.

Buffalo News  
Sat., Aug. 8

## IN THE DEBATE