

EDITORIALS

MANHATTAN PROJECT LEFTOVERS

Good riddance! The nuke waste is going to be leaving Tonawanda

A long, hard campaign to get radioactive waste from the World War II Manhattan Project moved out of the Town of Tonawanda seems headed for a successful and justifiable conclusion.

The result is an important local victory over a long haul. It's worth recalling that a decade ago the federal government not only planned to keep the waste in Tonawanda but to add nuclear waste from Colonie, near Albany, to the Tonawanda pile. The Colonie move was killed by legislation engineered some years ago by Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Town of Tonawanda. And, now, most of the home-grown Tonawanda waste will be shipped away.

There are congratulations in order for a group of public officials who flew under the banner of CANIT (Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda) and for their supporting citizens.

The uranium waste, contaminated residues from the historic project that developed the atomic bomb, wound up in four Tonawanda sites in the western part of town, two of them abutting the Niagara River. Cleanup work on one site has begun. Work on two others will soon be discussed in a public meeting. For the fourth site — the Seaway Industrial Park — cleanup processes are still undetermined. A complication at that site is that much of the radioac-

tive waste has been buried under a tall mound of refuse and fill.

All of the waste results from uranium processing performed under contract with the Manhattan Project by Linde Air Products Corp. Linde separated uranium at its ceramics plant from 1942 to 1946. This is not, by any means, the most dangerous of nuclear waste, because its radioactivity is far from the most concentrated. But this waste has an exceedingly long life.

For more than 20 years, the U.S. Department of Energy elaborately planned and studied the disposal of the Tonawanda waste, along with Manhattan Project residue elsewhere. "Slow" is the word to describe the way it went.

A few years ago, the department's preferred answer for Tonawanda was to move the waste to a single Tonawanda location, encapsulate it in clay and fence it in. Fortunately, the department changed its direction and was beginning removal measures when responsibility for Manhattan Project cleanup was shifted to the Army Corps of Engineers.

Richard Tobe, County Executive Gorski's representative on CANIT and its chairman, said local corps officials are "gung ho" to get moving. Hooray.

It is expected that the Corps will be taking bids from disposal sites to see

which one will accept the waste for the least money. Tobe says there are privately owned disposal sites in Utah and Washington interested in taking the waste for a price.

The sites will be remediated to a high standard. Ground water would be off-limits for drinking, but since the town is served by piped water, that's not a problem.

Removal is the right decision. Failure of the clay containment cell — due to weather or human error — would spell more trouble in closely populated Tonawanda than in remote regions of the West. The Tonawanda locations are near the Niagara River and its eternal flow of fresh water.

The half-life of this waste is long — it should be in a place where it is much less likely to be disturbed than on the shores of the Great Lakes water system.

So take it away.

Details of a proposal to remove waste from two of the Tonawanda sites will be disclosed at a public meeting at 7 p.m. Dec. 17 in the Philip Sheridan Building, 3200 Elmwood Ave., Town of Tonawanda.