

Cleanup plans lauded by town

Work will accomodate commercial development

By Joelle Gresock
Staff Writer

Federal plans to clean-up the Ashland landfill sites in the Town of Tonawanda will safely allow the area to accommodate future commercial development. Foes of the plan say guidelines used are unacceptable and feel a major portion is being left untouched.

The sites are located off River Road, adjacent to the City of Tonawanda, and contain radioactive byproducts of the Manhattan Project of World War II.

The Army Corps of Engineers will begin to clean-up Ashland 1 and Ashland 2 sites in July. About 42,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste contained in soil will be scrapped from the site and shipped to a storage facility. This will eliminate all materials that are above federal safety guidelines. The materials removed will be above the federal guidelines of 40 picocuries—the “safe” amount of Thorium-230. The work will subsequently lower the levels of other radioactive materials such as radium.

The materials were generated by the former Linde Air products Division of Union Carbide. The factory processed uranium ore in the 1940s to be used for research into refining bomb-grade uranium. Processing wastes were taken from Linde to the 10-acre Ashland 1 site. These wastes were moved between 1974 and 1982 to the adjacent Ashland 2 site. About half of this material, that are acceptable according to federal guidelines, will remain following clean-up.

“When we do a clean-up, our main priority is human life and meeting safety guidelines,” Army Corps project engineer David Conboy said. “We take our responsibilities very seriously.”

The engineers released a formal adoption of the \$38 million clean-up plan last month in a “Record of Decision.” They took over management of the site in October, 1997 from the U.S. Department of Energy. Work should begin in July with completion expected in the fall. The sites will not be capped but rather left usable for industrial development.

William Watson, chairman of the city’s General Environmental Control Board, doesn’t feel the clean-up plan is as complete as it should be. He said the plan may lead the public think all hazardous material is being eliminated when only a portion is being removed.

“I agree a half a loaf of bread is better than no loaf, but we’re only getting a few crumbs,” Mr. Watson said. “That may not be enough.”

Supervisor Carl Calabrese said he is pleased with federal plans to rectify the site and refutes Mr. Watson’s claims. He said Mr. Watson’s concerns may be unsubstantiated.

“I told Mr. Watson he is a public official in the city and when he speaks he should chose his words carefully,” Mr. Calabrese said. “His words scare people needlessly. He should be careful what he says.”

The supervisor said he doesn’t feel the town should “continuously put off the federal government.”

“We shouldn’t postpone clean-up,” Mr. Calabrese said. “That money may not be there when the project is perfect and we decide to do it.”

The Coalition Against Nuclear Waste in Tonawanda spearheaded the efforts to have the waste removed. The coalition is comprised of local lawmakers including Mr. Calabrese and Tonawanda Mayor Alice Roth.

Mr. Watson is also dismayed the Niagara Landfill (formerly the Seaway landfill) that sits between the two Ashland sites is not being cleaned up.

He said the Niagara landfill contains methane producing gar-

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bage and radon. Because the radon needs to be “vented” to prevent explosion, a regular clay cap is not an option. Operators of the site, Browning Ferris Industries, installed a cap with a series of extraction wells.

The New York state Department of Environmental Conservation released a report last month that confirmed radon levels at the site aren’t a hazard to the environment or to public health.

Mr. Watson said the Ashland sites should be “secondary” to the Niagara Landfill.

The state DEC took several samples in 1997, and determined levels of radon is no higher than would be found naturally. The state DEC is reviewing plans to clean-up the Niagara Landfill.

“I’m so impressed with the study,” County Legislature Chairman Charles Swanick said. “There is no problem there. I’m satisfied that action is being taken and I support the plans of the Town of Tonawanda to meet guidelines.”

He also applauded the plans to clean-up the Ashland sites.