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CITY OF TONAWANDA: Searching for a cure

By Dan Miner/minerd@gnnnewspaper.com
The Tonawanda News

They began as Riverview Residents for Kids. They've become Clean Up Riverview's Environment, or CURE.

And now, the group of City of Tonawanda residents who want the federal government to remove radioactive materials in the Town of Tonawanda landfill say they're gaining momentum.

"We're meeting in homes, in private residences," said Joyce Hogenkamp, a Tonawanda City School Board member and one of the group's informal co-chairpersons. "Every time we meet it just keeps getting bigger."

CURE, which has an estimated 50 members, swelled in membership after an unruly mid-February meeting which served as an illustration of the disconnect between parties trying to test and cap the landfill — including U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and Town of Tonawanda officials — and disgruntled City of Tonawanda residents.

The group has a range of goals, including obtaining federal help for the removal of radioactive materials possibly left at the landfill from the nation's early atomic energy program and testing Riverview Elementary School for radioactive contamination. The school sits adjacent to the landfill.

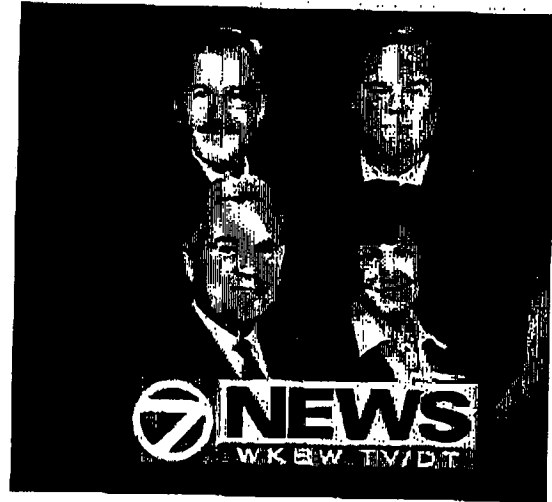
"We're just trying to find answers to secure the health of our families and the financial security of our homes," said Chris Thomas, another of the group's co-chairs whose backyard is separated from the landfill by a fence. "We want timelines met, and to be involved in the remediation process with sites adjacent to our property."

Obscure documents

Thomas says he has spent hours at the City of Tonawanda Public Library, combing through documents from the 1990s, when the Department of Energy administered the site.

He has found documents which indicate soil samples from the landfill exceed Department of Energy guideline values for radionuclides in surface and subsurface soil. One document says, "nine of these samples contained radionuclide concentrations more than 30 times the guideline value." What the Department of Energy defines as a 'guideline value' is not clear.

City of Tonawanda Councilman Rick Davis, another CURE co-



Photos



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: Members of City of Tonawanda's concerned citizen's group, CURE, discuss the Town of Tonawanda landfill. Joe Eberle/The Tonawanda News (Click for larger image)

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chair, unearthed another document on the Department of Energy's Web site. Though the document deals mainly with cleanup at the Linde Air Products site, it reads: "The volume of waste to be managed at Linde and one vicinity property (the Town of Tonawanda landfill) is estimated at 54,000 cubic meters (71,000 cubic yards). Waste minimization efforts during the remedial action will include decontaminating structures and surfaces."

Whether that remedial action includes the Town of Tonawanda landfill is also unclear. The document goes on to state, "The Department also determined that the Town of Tonawanda landfill, which is a vicinity property of Linde, contained Manhattan Engineer District-related radioactive constituents at levels above criteria."

What criteria the document is referencing is also not immediately clear.

Army Corps

The Department of Energy turned over control of FUSRAP sites, including the Town of Tonawanda landfill, to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1997. The Army Corps conducted extensive testing at the site between 2001 and 2004, and found elevated levels of radioactivity, but none that violate the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines which the Army Corps uses by law for its sites.

"We rely on guidelines that have been established by the U.S. EPA, who err on the side of protectiveness," said Steven Buechi, the Army Corps landfill project manager. "So the risk assessment that you come up with is conservative."

The Army Corps' assessments are based on an adult spending two hours on the landfill per week for 30 years, Buechi said. Once the landfill is capped, the risks will drop significantly.

The Army Corps has done no testing for homeowners living near the site. They'd be at less risk than a recreational user would, Buechi said.

CURE members have become increasingly dubious of claims by any government agency, and have essentially disregarded the Army Corps' position. Thomas said they have met with several lawyers to help with the cause, but haven't yet retained any counsel.

Getting heard

A public meeting for anyone interested in the landfill will be run by CURE co-chairs, who also include City of Tonawanda residents Dave Moran, John Plyler and Hogenkamp's father, Cap Hoffmann.

The meeting will be from 1 to 3 p.m. March 3 at Riverview Elementary.

The point of the meeting is to educate residents about the landfill, and develop a plan for them to move forward as a cohesive unit, Hogenkamp said. More specifically, a plan to pressure senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer and Congresswoman Louise Slaughter will be developed.

Putting on the pressure

Mayor Ron Pilozzi has sent several letters to those officials

Tonawanda News - CITY OF TONAWANDA: Searching for a cure

Page 3 of 4

asking for their help in removing the radioactive materials. The city's common council has passed a resolution of similar sentiment to accompany those letters.

The pressure seems, tentatively at least, to be working.

Schumer released a statement on Feb. 23 urging the Army Corps to review and retest areas in the landfill close to where people live.

"The Army Corps needs to act fast to reassure the community because we may have a very serious problem on our hands," Schumer said. "The type of materials and dangerous radiation involved require a full, thorough and independent assessment to make sure the community is 100 percent free from harm."

Slaughter's aids say she's keeping an eye on the issue.

"My office is very involved in the administration of the FUSRAP sites in my district, including the Town of Tonawanda landfill," she said in a statement. "I will continue to work with federal and state agencies to provide residents with ample opportunity to voice their concerns. We all share the same goal of ensuring the landfill does not present a health risk."

In several days, a link on the city's Web site, <http://www.ci.tonawanda.ny.us/>, will allow residents to access a form letter which they can sign and send to federal representatives, Pilozzi said.

An Army Corps record of decision is due in March on whether the radioactive materials should be removed, followed by a 30-day public comment period and public meeting.

Contact Dan Miner at 693-1000, Ext. 115.



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