

From Manhattan Project: An unwanted local legacy

Dispose of uranium waste outside Tonawanda

DURING World War II, Linde Air Products Corp. in the Town of Tonawanda was involved in the development of the atomic bomb in what history knows as the Manhattan Project. Contaminated radioactive residues from the project exist to this day at four locations in the western part of the town, including two that abut the Niagara River north of the South Grand Island Bridge.

The waste is hardly the most dangerous. Dust from uranium ore, it has been through a separation process that lowered its radioactivity. It could cause cancer if inhaled or ingested, but not radiation sickness.

This waste has a half-life measured in billions of years, a calculation that gives new meaning to the word "forever." The question of what to do with the waste is coming to a head as the U.S. Department of Energy proceeds with a slow-paced program to clean up 44 contaminated sites nationwide, almost all of them unwanted legacies from the Manhattan Project. The Tonawanda site — involving 350,000 cubic yards — holds the largest volume.

The department has elaborately studied the alternatives and issued a report that prefers digging up most of the waste and storing it at one of the Tonawanda locations. The waste would be encapsulated in clay in a fenced-in area and monitored by a staff.

Many local public officials, though, rail against storing the waste here. They have developed persuasive arguments for shipping it by rail to a federally licensed, commercial disposal site in an isolated section of Utah where it would be willingly received.

The basic difference is cost. The Department of Energy estimates on-site storage

would cost \$59 million. Transportation and disposal fees would increase costs to \$201 million if the waste went to Utah. That's a big difference, but compelling reasons still oppose storage in Tonawanda:

□ Failure in the clay containment cell would have much greater consequences in heavily populated Tonawanda than in Utah. Over the huge stretch of time involved, earthquakes, floods and even glaciers are possible. So are improper maintenance, errors or carelessness in some later time.

□ The Tonawanda storage site would be near the Niagara River, where the world's fresh water goes rushing by. Federal officials insist there has been no migration to contaminate the river. Let's keep it that way.

□ The extra expense would be fair and reasonable. The Department of Energy is projecting costs of \$2.5 billion to clean up all 44 sites. Local officials calculate that Tonawanda's residue represents, by volume, 18 percent of the waste on the 44 sites. Even the extra expense of shipping it to Utah would result in the Tonawanda project taking just 8 percent of the \$2.5 billion. So 18 percent of the waste would be more safely stored for 8 percent of total costs.

□ These locations represent ideal redevelopment sites for parks, marinas, housing, hotels and retail uses. But they will not be attractive if radioactive wastes are nearby, regardless of government assurances that all is well. What homeowner wants a mound of uranium in the backyard?

The Department of Energy is accepting public comments on its preferred alternative now. Its process leaves the door open for changes based on those public comments. Our comment is simple: Take it away.