

# A welcome turnaround on a local uranium legacy

## *Get atomic-project waste out of Tonawanda*

**T**HE U.S. Department of Energy's "preferred alternative" for dealing with radioactive contamination in four places in the Town of Tonawanda turned out to be no one else's preference. So the department has wisely pulled back to re-examine the issue.

New technology may make the next answer acceptable to area politicians and citizens who rightly challenged the department's initial conclusions during a period of time allowed for public comment.

At issue is what to do about low-level radioactive wastes from uranium processing by the Linde Air Products Corp. during development of the atomic bomb in the renowned Manhattan Project. The locations are all in the industrial west end of the town.

The waste — officially described as "low-grade uranium ore tailings" — is hardly the hottest. A separation process has lowered its radioactivity. If inhaled or eaten, it could cause cancer, but it does not cause radiation sickness. Still, it has a half-life measured in billions of years. It's not the sort of thing people want in their back yards.

The department's elaborate study looked at six alternatives and wound up preferring storage at one of the four Tonawanda locations. Most of the waste would be dug up and put in a single spot encapsulated in a clay cell with a long-term life expectancy and with maintenance for as long as 1,000 years.

For local people, the overwhelming preference is to get the waste out of Tonawanda. For good reasons, that's the right an-

swer. Heavily populated Tonawanda should not be the location of a containment cell that might fail in the face of acts of nature, climate changes or human malfeasance during the many generations it must function properly.

Furthermore, the locations are near the Niagara River, magnifying the consequences of a mishap. Finally, the town has plans to develop the waterfront with housing, marinas and various commercial uses. Radioactive waste nearby won't help.

Fortunately, there is a licensed commercial disposal facility in a lightly populated location in Clive, Utah, that would be willing to receive the waste. The sticking point from the federal point of view is the cost — \$59 million for on-site storage versus \$201 million for rail shipment to Utah. But the overall federal cost projections for cleaning up 44 old radioactive sites throughout the country have enough leeway to handle the additional costs.

It's also fortunate that department officials are now talking about new technology that might be able to reduce the volume of radioactive waste at the Tonawanda locations by 65 percent. There would be less to transport to Utah, presumably making that alternative more attractive. The reduction technology is to be tested in New Jersey before being applied to the Tonawanda clean-up.

For the moment, the news is good. The department has turned away from on-site storage. That change is the first step toward a better way of dealing with Tonawanda's unwelcome legacy from World War II.