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<http://wivb.com/2014/10/23/neighbors-still-have-questions-about-buried-radioactive-waste/>

WIVB - Buffalo, NY - 10/23/2014

Neighbors still have questions about buried radioactive waste
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Buffalo District, North Atlantic Division

By Jordan Williams

TONAWANDA, N.Y. (WIVB) – How dangerous is radioactive waste buried behind families' homes at an old Town of Tonawanda landfill? Neighbors raised more questions after a News 4 Investigates report three months ago. We stayed on the story and dug through decades of records to find out how the waste got there and how serious the health threat really is.

The perfect place to grow up

In the 1950's the neighborhood off Hackett Driver was the perfect picture of suburban America. Jack Gallagher and his friends loved having room to roam near the dump. "Well, we used to go back in the fields and catch rabbits and stuff," he recalled.

Gallagher says he and his buddies played near and perhaps on the dump. The could have exposed him and his friends to radioactive waste. His school, Riverview Elementary, is still open only a block away.

"I don't think when they built the school that they ever knew that all of this stuff was in here either." The stuff he's referring to is the big field full of potentially cancer- causing agents.

Sickness starts

The picture-perfect neighborhood turned upside down in the 70's. "The lady next door got sick and passed away first, and then the lady around the corner was sick towards the end of the first lady," he said. Then, she died, "...And then my mother got it."

Cancer cases had then 20 year-old panicking. "You just start hearing as time went by more and more people in the old neighborhood [being sick]."

Across town environmental activist Phil Sweet saw the same thing. "They died off at an early, early age. They should be here today," he said.

Sweet's wife lost several of her friends. "You have to understand there's so many people that are involved in this that have got to be hurting over this— that have lost their loved ones over this."

The history

Feds first found radioactive waste in 1990. So how did it get here? We obtained records through state freedom of information law.

State scientists wrote in 2007, "...This radioactive waste originated on the Linde site from the operations

of the Manhattan Engineering District (MED)."

The leftovers of the first atomic bomb are buried in the Tonawanda landfill.

News 4 investigates also obtained a 1981 state report. It digs into what happened at Llinde during World War II. Authors wrote, "The army's 'Manhattan Project' disposed of 37 million gallons of radioactive waste in underground wells..." between 1944 and 1946 in the Town of Tonawanda.

Gallagher read the report, too. "They pumped it into old wells that were under the plant, and that way it would disperse in the aquifer and it'd be untraceable."

Letters in the 1981 report show the company's wells clogged up. Workers started dumping the radioactive materials into a ditch that ran into Two Mile Creek. Low-level radioactive sediment dug up from that creek "...was placed into the landfill in the late 1940s or early 1950s."

How much is there?

UB chemistry professor Joseph Gardella Jr says the dump likely contains radioactive Uranium-238 and Radium-226. "We don't know how much is there. We don't know even know where it is in the landfill."

There's no documentation detailing exactly what was done. "Even though they're monitoring along that northern area [next to homes on Hackett Drive], they have no evidence that there's stuff even close to it. They're monitoring because that's where the housing is, and they want to make sure that people are protected," he explained.

Federal scientists claim no one is in danger unless erosion exposes the waste.

Gardella applauds the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' handling of the complicated situation. "It's a really complicated situation, and the Army Corps has done, I think, an exemplary job of putting in a monitoring system to protect the people in the neighborhood."

Gardella wants workers to cap the waste. State scientists disagree, arguing in 2007, "...All waste needs to be excavated to a minimum distance of 100 feet south of the property line."

Rick Davis, mayor of the City of Tonawanda, believes materials with a radioactive half life of 1,600 years must go. "A lot of waste comes up to the fence— well, that's not a magical chain link fence. The contamination doesn't just stop right there at the fence."

What about people's health?

The New York State Department of Health did a cancer study in 2007. Contrary to what residents say, the department of health found no increase in cancer and no evidence of unusual cancer patterns. But the state only looked at current cancer patterns.

The mayor would like to see a cancer study examine cases from the 1970's and 80's. "It's now 2014, and it's been 24 years worth of studies and sampling to the tune of over four million dollars. I wonder how much it would have cost to clean up that total area back in the early 90s?"

Jack Gallagher and his family moved in 2002. "This isn't something that every single house had these problems. It might be one out of three. It might be three in a row, but the more you talk to people that grew up around here, the more you hear these stories, and it's like holy moley, this is another one."

For some, it's another painful reminder of western New York paying the price for an industrial past.

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