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EDITORIALS

‘ ... for the people ... ’

Working together, Higgins and Reed serve residents threatened by **West Valley**

It is unusual these days to witness any kind of bipartisan effort among legislators, especially those in Washington. Such cooperation often seems a relic of some forgotten – or mythical – past.

So, when two congressional representatives from this area worked across the aisle to fund nuclear cleanup work at the beleaguered **West Valley Demonstration Project**, it offered encouragement that even in a divisive time, public officials are able to put aside political differences in service of the common good.

It is unfortunate that Americans today live under a fractured political system that promotes division. The norm, often politically enforced, is for representatives working in the nation’s capital – and, in some cases, at the local and state levels – to be always at crossed swords, always looking for chinks in the armor. Only rarely do they work together, sometimes at risk of political ostracism.

Two Western New York congressmen – Democrat Brian Higgins of Buffalo and Republican Tom Reed of Corning – have frequently shown themselves willing to go where good sense dictates. They recently did that together by serving the anxious residents of Cattaraugus County, people who have lived some half a century amid nuclear waste.

As a result of the coordination between Reed and Higgins, the nuclear waste treatment site in Cattaraugus County, 10 miles south of Springville, will receive \$75 million in federal funding per fiscal year through 2026.

That steady flow of money should help to reduce the stress among residents concerned about the government’s indifference to cleaning up the site. It should also reassure critics such as the Sierra Club, which has declared the site inappropriate to house radioactive and toxic waste.

The **West Valley project** has been contentious. What Reed and Higgins accomplished could prove pivotal. Reed also gave President Trump credit by adding that he “agrees – that this is a worthwhile project.”

The **West Valley plant** reprocessed spent reactor fuel from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, producing hundreds of thousands of gallons of high level radioactive waste. The site also accepted low-level radioactive waste until 1975, when contaminated water was found to be leaking from trenches holding the low-level waste. The federal government assumed responsibility for cleaning up the site in 1980 – going on 40 years ago.

Until now, Reed has followed in the footsteps of congressional predecessors who represented the Southern Tier district in waging annual battles for federal funding of the cleanup. But they never

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won a formal authorization, or a congressionally approved promise to pay for the program. It was a process guaranteed to insult and incite those who live with the threat of contamination.

The two-step congressional funding process calls for Congress to authorize programs before setting aside funding. The recently finalized bill means that an authorization will be in place for the next several years. The result: more easily justified annual appropriations to pay for the work of securing and removing nuclear waste at **West Valley**.

Reed, who has been noted in these pages for his leadership on the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus, and Higgins, who serves in the congressional majority, did the work in the House in March. The Senate recently finalized the measure.

Moreover, the project recently won \$75.2 million in funding, a slight increase from the \$75 million in 2019 and much more than levels in the mid-2010s, when it received roughly \$60 million annually.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer and his Democratic colleague from New York, Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand announced the funding.

Lincoln called it “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” All elected representatives should be willing to work across the aisle when it so plainly serves the interests of the public. Many won’t, but Higgins and Reed did, to the benefit of Western New Yorkers of all political beliefs.