

Friday, April 30, 2021

## West Valley Citizens Task Force resolute in WVDP cleanup demands



Members of the West Valley Citizens Task Force met Wednesday via ZOOM video reaffirmed their demands for a full cleanup of the nuclear site.

Rick Miller/Olean Times Herald

By RICK MILLER

WEST VALLEY — Members of the West Valley Citizens Task Force reviewed its 1998 final report Wednesday as the U.S. Department of Energy prepares for the open-air demolition of the main plant process building.

The task force meeting, held via ZOOM video, left no doubt that members want all nuclear and other wastes removed from the 200-acre **West Valley Demonstration Project**.

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By all wastes, the CTF members mean not only the 175 containers of radioactive glass logs made from high-level liquid waste, but all the debris from the main plant process building, the strontium “prong” in the soil beneath the building, the steel tanks that once held the radioactive liquid wastes and the state and Nuclear Regulatory Commission low-level waste dumps.

Wednesday’s meeting seemed a little more confrontational than in recent years. There was also a disagreement over the nature of some of the radioactive waste — defense or commercial.

The **New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA)**, which shares the cost of cleanup with the federal government, considers it defense waste, said director Paul Bembia.

Bryan Bower, DOE site director at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** said the department didn’t think declaring it defense waste was a viable pathway.

Ashford Supervisor John Pfeffer, a member of the Citizens Task Force for more than 20 years, said he planned to push to have the waste declared defense waste in a bid to get it removed from site more quickly.

After reviewing the group’s 1998 final report recommendations, there were a few changes recommended by Pfeffer and other CTF members that strengthened the language.

“It’s time for them (DOE) to step up and do the right thing,” said CTF board member Joe Patti. The site has not been fully characterized, he said. “I’m not sure I care where it’s going as long as it leaves.”

Patricia Townsend, who was not on the CTF when the 1998 final report was issued, said West Valley is still not a proper site for the wastes located there.

Seneca Nation representative Tony Memmo said the Senecas continue to support a full cleanup at the site.

CTF member Kathy McGoldrick was the first to mention the upcoming open-air demolition of the main plant processing buildings. She reminded DOE officials that many in the CTF would like to see a tent over the building while it is being torn down to prevent the spread of radioactive dust.

Building a containment structure over the five-story main plant process building would add an estimated \$10 million or more to the demolition cost.

Pfeffer expressed concern that the cleanup seems to be going on forever. The Phase 2 cleanup, the extent of which is still being studied, won’t start until after the main plant process building is demolished to grade.

“I would much prefer the work being done safely than in a hurry,” added CTF member Ray Vaughn.

Several members also expressed concern over future federal funding for the cleanup and monitoring of the site. The cleanup is currently being funded at a \$75 million level for five years.

The site was operated by Nuclear Fuel Services to reprocess spent nuclear fuel rods from nuclear power plants from the mid-1960s until 1972 when it closed for renovations but never reopened. Congress approved the **West Valley Demonstration Plant** of 1980 to fund the cleanup.

Pfeffer agreed Thursday that the CTF meeting had been a little more confrontational than usual over the issues of true waste and the main plant process building demolition.

The Ashford supervisor feels that covering certain parts of the building during demolition — areas known to contain high levels of radioactivity — would add a level of protection to the community. Many community members are concerned over the open-air demolition, he said.

The contractor for the cleanup, CHBWV, has worked at removing contaminated equipment and piping from the building for the past 10 years. Radioactivity has penetrated some concrete surfaces.

Pfeffer said his concern is for a major flooding event or wind storm during the demolition could spread contamination. He said current plans call for demolishing small parts of the building at a time unlike the vitrification building, which was demolished quickly three years ago. Debris was not removed quickly enough.

Pfeffer said he hopes the Department of Energy begins holding public meetings to discuss their plans for the open-air demolition. “It’s in the community’s best interest to get out the message.”

DOE and CHBWV officials are expected to attend the May 12 meeting of the Ashford Town Board to discuss their plan. “I’m going to demand multiple public meetings,” he said.

“I also want them to tent part of the building when its’ demolished,” Pfeffer said.

The supervisor said he feels safe with the **WVDP** plan for monitoring for radioactive contamination from dust during the demolition. Proximity monitors would sound an alarm before it ever got to the fence line.

The question is “How do we reassure the community?” Pfeffer asked.