

In milestone for cleanup, demolition will take down largest nuclear building at West Valley



Contributer photo

Demolition is to start in September on the largest building at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

Barbara O'Brien
News Staff Reporter

The largest – and often deemed the hottest – nuclear building at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** will start to come down next month.

With concrete walls one to five feet thick, it will be a laborious process to dismantle the building safely to contain the remaining radiation. The engineered demolition is expected to take 32 months.

“It’s not like taking a demolition ball and knocking it down,” said Joseph Pillittere, spokesman for the contractor, CH2M HILL BWXT West Valley. “We want to take it down piece by piece to maintain the stability of the structure. This is all pre-planned.”

It is a major step in the more than half century of history at the former reprocessing plant 35 miles south of Buffalo, where 640 metric tons of irradiated nuclear fuel was processed to recover reusable plutonium and uranium from spent nuclear reactor fuel.

“I think it means progress,” said John Pfeffer, supervisor in the rural Town of Ashford, where the plant is located. “I think we’re finally seeing this black eye removed.”

Citizen watchdogs

A core group of interested residents has been watching, commenting and even suing over the **West Valley** site since the 1970s.

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"I'm 80 years old now. I'm not going to see that place cleaned up. I won't," said Joanne Hameister of East Aurora.

She got involved by going to meetings on the site through the League of Women Voters in 1978, thinking it might be a five-year commitment. She joined the West Valley Coalition on Nuclear Wastes, a group that was never incorporated, but sued the U.S. Department of Energy in 1985 and won a federal court decision requiring an environmental impact study on the cleanup project.

"It is only 30 miles away from the city. We're talking about a neighbor," Hameister said.

The 3,300 acre site also is near creeks and tributaries that eventually empty into Lake Erie and the Niagara River.

"It has already contaminated Buttermilk Creek," Hameister said. "We're worried about that, really worried about that."

CH2M HILL BWXT West Valley, the company performing the cleanup, has been planning the demolition for years, and has a three-dimensional model of the building that helped in the preparation.

Safety concerns

Some advocates wanted the entire building to be enclosed during demolition to keep radioactive dust from contaminating streams, fields and the atmosphere. Instead, workers will spray water on the areas of the building being taken apart. The water will be collected, treated on site and released, if possible. Otherwise, it will be shipped off site.

Pfeffer, the Ashford supervisor, said he had been concerned about water management and possible flooding from heavy rain storms, but he said he is satisfied that the contractor will properly handle the water.

Real-time monitors will check the air, and crews are prepared to shut down work if radioactive levels get too high. Continuous air monitors and fixed air samplers are placed further away from the building, looking for potential migration of contamination. Highly sensitive air samplers will surround the site about one mile from the deconstruction area.

The building will be taken down to a slab, with underground structures to be removed in the future.

The Main Plant Process Building is 130 feet wide, 270 feet long and 79 feet tall at its tallest point. The 35,100-square-foot building operated from 1966 to 1972, and is the last major facility remaining at the site.

While it was the "hottest" radioactive building on the site, it is not as radioactive as it once was.

"Twenty-five years ago, that building was highly contaminated because of the previous operations," Pillittere said.

But the building is no longer as "hot" as it was, he said. Workers reduced the radioactivity in the building by more than 98% by removing 50 tons of contaminated equipment and more than seven miles of contaminated piping, Pillittere said.

The property is owned by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. The [West Valley Demonstration Project Act of 1980](#) authorized the federal government to take control of 167 acres and clean up the nuclear waste. Since then, about 1.3 million cubic feet of low-level waste has been taken to repositories off-site. By February 2020, the Department of Energy reported spending about \$3.1 billion on the cleanup.

What's next

There is high-level waste still at the facility, but there are no facilities authorized to accept it.

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Ray Vaughan of Hamburg, an environmental scientist and member of the West Valley Citizens Task Force, has been watching what goes on at **West Valley** since 1978. That's when he went to his first meeting of the concerned citizens that became the West Valley Coalition on Nuclear Wastes.

"My main focus at this point is looking ahead a couple of years to the major decision that the two site proprietors, the U.S. Department of Energy and **NYSERDA**, are going to be making as to whether to dig up and remove the underground wastes, or somehow try to stabilize them in place and leave them for future generations to deal with," Vaughan said.

Paul Bembia, director of NYSERDA's West Valley Site Management Program, called the demolition of the Main Plant Process Building a major milestone.

"Following demolition, the next stage of the cleanup project will be removal of the below ground portions of the Main Plant Process Building and associated contaminated soils," he said in a statement.

NYSERDA and the Department of Energy are developing a supplemental environmental impact statement that will address what will happen with the remaining facilities, such as the high-level waste tank farm, disposal facilities and other contamination at the site, he said.

Many of those living close to the facility want all of the radioactive contaminants removed.

"This is a good thing that we're seeing the building come down. I'm hoping they do it in the manner prescribed, in a safe manner, and that we can look forward to the next phase of the demolition there, getting all of it out there. It all needs to come out of there," Pfeffer said. "This is not the appropriate place for any of it to remain."