

Town of Ashford

Past, Present, Future Impacts from the Western New York Nuclear Service Center

The Town of Ashford became a nuclear community in 1961 when 3,300 acres of taxpayer property was acquired by New York State as part of the federal government's initiative to develop commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing capability in the United States. The citizens who lost their property to New York State still have a negative attitude toward the acquisition and 93% of the property in the Town of Ashford remains tax exempt, the highest tax exempt community in New York State. It is interesting to note that the town fathers at the time had very little influence on the decision and the only demand that was met was the West Valley Post Office be the post office used by the site.

At that time, there was a belief that nuclear fuel reprocessing capabilities and demand would grow and so would the Town. New neighborhoods within the town would develop; the school would expand; the infrastructure would be developed and updated – “the streets would be paved in gold.” Neither the industry nor the Town saw the promised growth. Nuclear fuel reprocessing became more costly and uneconomical as a result of changing safety and environmental regulations. Just six years after the initiation of nuclear fuel reprocessing activities at West Valley, the site was shut down in 1972 – but in this short time, the federal and state government's experiment with commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing had thoroughly contaminated the central 200 acres of the site. When the site was shut down and the commercial operator walked away, they left 600,000 gallons of liquid high level waste in two underground storage tanks, a highly contaminated fuel reprocessing plant, a 15 acre low-level radioactive waste disposal area, a 5-acre high-level waste disposal area, a Strontium-90 groundwater plume, and a Cesium 137-air contamination plume that extended beyond the site boundary. Fortunately, 1970's negotiations between the Nuclear Fuel Services and NYS, and NYS and the federal government resulted in the passage of the 1980 West Valley Demonstration Project Act. The WVDP Act provided federal funding with a 10% state match to begin the clean-up at West Valley.

For the last three decades, the town has worked with the U.S. Department of Energy and the NYS Energy Research and Development Authority to support the clean-up of the West Valley Nuclear Service Center. Many jobs were created and overall the Town of Ashford and surrounding communities benefitted from the increased revenues associated with as many as 1,400 employees during peak operations leading to the vitrification of the HLW in the 1990's. The 277 HLW canisters produced as a result of the vitrification activities remain stored in one of the shielded cells in the process plant.

Since the late 1990's employment at the site has continually dropped off as the vitrification operations were concluded and as the site transitioned to decommissioning activities. Most recently, with the expiration of funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in June 2011, and the initiation of Phase 1 Decommissioning with a new DOE contract and contractor in September 2011, the workforce has been reduced by more than one-third, many of which were local residents. Needless to say, the Town has been devastated by these recent layoffs. Many of these highly trained, skilled workers are currently unemployed and will not find work in the nuclear field, unless they are willing and able to re-locate -- If this was the result of the completion of all clean-up activities at West Valley this would be understandable but decades of work remains to be done. A more appropriate and reasonable level of funding to support the cleanup is the issue.

The primary focus of the Phase 1 decommissioning contract is decommissioning and removal of the highly contaminated Nuclear Fuel Re-Processing Building which currently holds the 277 canisters of vitrified HLW. The re-location of the HLW canisters from the Process Building to an engineered dry aboveground storage facility at the WVDP is one of the first tasks that will need to be completed. The ultimate fate of these 277 HLW canisters and other potential HLW at West Valley including the HLW tanks, the vitrification melter, and materials buried in the two disposal areas will be the subject of future decisions – but without a destination, they will remain indefinitely at West Valley – presenting only risk and no benefit to the community.

The Blue Ribbon Commission should recommend that the federal government do the following to address West Valley's HLW and other radioactive waste contamination problems:

- 1) Fully fund West Valley clean-up operations to support employment levels and activities necessary to complete the remaining work to enhance environmental protection and public safety;
- 2) Reconcile current plans for West Valley Phase 1 decommissioning plan contract for dismantlement and removal of the highly contaminated Nuclear Fuel Re-processing Building, which currently holds the 277 vitrified HLW canisters to be relocated to an engineered, aboveground dry storage facility, with opportunities presented by the BRC to chart a new path for managing the nation's HLW;
- 3) Classify the 277 HLW canisters and other potential HLW at West Valley (tanks, vitrification melter, material buried in two disposal areas) as a priority waste stream for removal to a consolidated interim waste facility and then to permanent disposal in a national deep geologic repository.