

"Federation Corner" column
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Montgomery County's own Love Canal

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The old saying goes that ignorance is bliss. But sometimes ignorance or lack of knowledge is a dangerous thing, especially when it involves a matter of public health and safety like the chemical contamination leaching from the Gude Landfill near Rockville. One need not stretch the facts to draw comparisons between the Gude Landfill and the infamous Love Canal in New York.

The Love Canal neighborhood near the Niagara River ranks a special place in U.S. environmental history as being one of the nation's first recognized toxic waste dump sites. The discovery of such sites led to passage in the late 1970s of the Federal Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) that holds polluters accountable for their damages. CERCLA is commonly known as the Superfund Act because of the fund created in the legislation which is used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to clean up toxically polluted residential locations.

The Love Canal was originally intended as a shipping lane to bypass Niagara Falls and connect the two elevations of the Niagara River, providing a navigable passage to Lake Ontario. But money ran out mid-way through construction in the 1890s and Congress then passed an act prohibiting water being removed from the river, in order to preserve the falls. Only one mile of the canal had been dug before construction was halted, and the trench gradually filled with water.

In the 1920s, the site was used as a trash dump for the municipality of Niagara Falls. Then, in 1942 the development company which owned the property granted the Hooker Chemical Company permission to use the site as storage for the chemical waste it was producing, and the canal was drained and lined with thick clay. Barrels containing some 21,000 tons of chemicals were placed in the canal before dumping was halted in 1952. The site was then covered with dirt, and vegetation was allowed to grow on top of the dumpsite

Decades later, following a wet winter and spring in 1977, residents in the Love Canal neighborhood reported having puddles of oil or colored water in their yards and basements. Then in 1979, residents of the neighborhood that grew up around the dump site exhibited a "disturbingly high rate of miscarriages," according to the EPA. A survey conducted by the Love Canal Homeowners Association found that 56% of the children born between 1974 and 1978 had a birth defect.

Eleven known carcinogens, or cancer causing chemicals, were found in the groundwater flowing beneath the community, the most prevalent being benzene. Children were forbidden to play in their own yards, where the vegetation was dying. It was feared that chemicals in the groundwater could leach into basements and evaporate into household air, and as a precaution home sump pumps were sealed off. Eventually, in 1979, the EPA stepped in and began the slow and exorbitantly costly process of condemning homes, displacing residents and cleaning up the area.

Now consider the parallels between Love Canal and the Gude Landfill, the oldest formal landfill in Montgomery County, which received approximately 4.8 million tons of municipal waste from 1965 until the site was closed in 1982. The depth of the waste on the 100-acre site varies from 55 to 100 feet, and is now covered with two feet of soil on which vegetation has grown.

According to a 2003 entry from the county's Department of Environmental Protection website, DEP "periodically monitors the ground water and surface water around the perimeter of the site. There is some contamination at the site; however, the contamination is sufficiently low such that no formal remediation is required, aside from maintenance of the soil cap and correction of leachate seeps to the extent feasible. Ongoing activities at the site include maintenance of monitoring well access roads and the gas management system, repairs to storm water management structures and correction of ponding and eroded areas."

When the county government recently proposed putting a school bus depot on the landfill site, area residents who had formed the Gude Landfill Concerned Citizens (GLCC) group began to educate the public and elected officials of the problems that would likely result from such a move. According to their website, "in the process of gathering information, the GLCC requested any and all lab analysis of water and air samples taken at the landfill. The results were shocking. Twenty eight chemicals, including cyanide, mercury, lead, benzene, DDT and industrial solvents were present in groundwater at levels above the Maximum Contamination Limits set by the EPA. Some of the contamination was 10 times or more above the permitted levels."

Soon after the GLCC testified about the contamination and environmental hazards at a County Council hearing in January of this year, the bus depot plan was withdrawn by County Executive Ike Leggett. But no sooner had that plan died than the county came up with a new scheme to pave over 7 acres on the east side of the landfill and create a commercial bulk wood processing facility there. The "yard trim" site would see at least 150 large commercial trucks bringing in huge loads every day, and dumping the debris in a pile, to be fed into industrial chippers.

The Maryland State Department of the Environment (MDE) has now stepped in and placed the bulk wood processing center on hold, ordering a detailed engineering analysis before any further action is taken. And on January 28, MDE officials ordered the county to develop a Groundwater and Surface Water Monitoring Plan for the Gude Landfill to determine how bad the toxic contamination is and how far it extends onto adjacent properties. Although the county has been monitoring the site since the closure of the landfill, results had not been reported to state officials since 1984. Now, all groundwater and gas monitoring data must be promptly submitted to the MDE.

At a County Council meeting on February 9, a county DEP spokesman admitted that the groundwater in the area--including nearby Rock Creek--is almost certainly contaminated, but that all neighboring residents are on municipal water so their drinking water supply is not affected. He did suggest that kids and dogs should not play in Rock Creek.

Eckardt Beck, EPA Administrator during the Love Canal crisis, opined that there are probably hundreds of similar dumpsites across the United States. And President Carter declared that discovering these dumpsites is "one of the grimmest discoveries of the modern era." At least we're no longer ignorant in Montgomery County. We know where one of our toxic waste dumps is located.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net