

## **Strategies for Public Involvement at the West Valley Demonstration Project – 9242**

Bryan Bower, U.S. Department of Energy; Tom Attridge, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority; Sonja Allen and John Chamberlain, West Valley Environmental Services;  
West Valley Demonstration Project  
10282 Rock Springs Road, West Valley, NY 14171-9799

### **ABSTRACT**

The West Valley Demonstration Project Act (WVDP Act) of 1980 authorized the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to lead a high-level radioactive waste management demonstration project at the site of the former spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in West Valley, New York. The site is owned by the State of New York, through the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). West Valley Environmental Services LLC (WVES) and its predecessor company, West Valley Nuclear Services Company (WVNSCO), have been the prime contractors at the site since the beginning of the Project.

One of the primary missions of the Act, demonstrating techniques for solidifying high-level liquid waste, was completed in 2002, a crowning achievement in technical innovation. Since that time, wide-scale decontamination and dismantlement work has continued at the demonstration project, moving the site closer to final cleanup decisions.

Since the Act was passed, the West Valley Demonstration Project (WVDP) personnel have worked hard to establish trust with the local community through a variety of public education, participation, and involvement activities. These efforts have been varied, and have collectively contributed to the WVDP's success. As the cleanup moves forward, the WVDP partners continue to utilize public involvement strategies to increase trust in a safe and secure future for the community.

This paper reviews the various public involvement activities that have, and continue to be, employed at the WVDP.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Western New York Nuclear Service Center (Center) was established in the 1960s as a commercial spent fuel reprocessing plant, accepting nuclear fuel from commercial and federally-owned power reactors. The Center is situated on a 13.5 square kilometer (3,345-acre) parcel owned by NYSERDA on behalf of the State of New York, located near the hamlet of West Valley in Cattaraugus County. The reprocessing facilities were constructed and operated by a private company, Nuclear Fuel Services, Inc. (NFS).

The NFS reprocessing operations began in 1966 and continued for six years. In 1972, the reprocessing plant was shut down for expansion, modifications and additions, though reprocessing never resumed. During the years of operation, the plant processed approximately 640 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel. As a byproduct of the operation, over 2,271 kiloliters (600,000 gallons) of liquid high-level radioactive waste was produced during reprocessing and stored in underground steel tanks. In 1976, NFS informed New York State that it intended to leave the reprocessing business and not renew the lease when the initial term expired at the end of 1980.

Federal legislation was enacted in 1980 providing for solidification of the high-level liquid radioactive waste from reprocessing, followed by clean-up of related facilities, areas and wastes. The WVDP Act authorized DOE to lead a high-level radioactive waste management demonstration project at the site of the former spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant. WVES and its predecessor company, WVNSCO, have been the prime contractors at the site since the beginning of the WVDP.

In 1996, NYSERDA and DOE issued a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for public comment which focused on evaluating closure options for the future management of facilities at the Center, but had no preferred alternative. The agencies spent considerable time and energy informing stakeholders about the Draft EIS and the options being considered.

The 1996 DEIS was a complex document that tried to consider all the possibilities for all the facilities on site. After receiving more than 1,700 comments on the DEIS, it was clear the agencies needed to identify a preferred alternative that would meet the regulatory requirements and would be inclusive of public input. WVDP considered using our experience with successful public involvement throughout the 1980s and early 1990s to obtain public input in the development of a preferred alternative for the Draft EIS.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Over the years, WVDP partners have collaborated to proactively share information with, and seek feedback from, the local community regarding the demonstration project cleanup. A variety of public education, participation, and involvement activities have been employed to engage stakeholders in the cleanup process. An important result has been the positive relationships that have developed with community leaders, local residents and special interest groups. Using a variety of venues and strategies, the WVDP partners have created ample opportunities to share information with and listen to concerns from the community.

The public involvement activities employed at the demonstration project are categorized as follows:

- Public Outreach
- Educational Outreach
- Community Service
- Media Relations
- Public Participation

The specific public involvement activities (within each category) employed at West Valley are described below.

### **Public Outreach**

The cornerstone of the WVDP public involvement approach is making sure information gets out to stakeholders in a timely manner, in a way that people can understand, while providing opportunities to answer questions should they arise.



*Figure 1. Stakeholders tour the WVDP.*

*Open House* - For nearly 20 years, the WVDP hosted an annual open house for community members that featured site tours, informational booths and hands-on demonstrations. Visitors were encouraged to talk with the scientists, engineers and operators responsible for the daily

operation of the cleanup. Food and refreshments were provided and served by the local volunteer fire company. (See Figure 1.)

*Newsletters* – Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words and the WVDP newsletter, WVDP InSite is used to convey Project information using both words and photos. The current newsletter is written, published and printed in house. The publication has an internal readership of about 400 and is also mailed to an external audience of 200. The publication is used to report on key activities, project priorities, and to provide a picture of where the project is headed. Readership includes employees and subcontractors, stakeholders, and elected officials. Current plans include electronic distribution of the newsletter to conserve paper and reduce costs.

*General Site Tours* – Between 1982 and 2001, providing site tours of the WVDP was a common practice. Community groups, high school and college students, emergency response personnel listened to an overview of the Project and toured the facilities. Since September 11, 2001, site tours have been limited to those related to the conduct of site business.

*Quarterly Public Meetings* - The WVDP partners hold four (Quarterly) Public Meetings each year. These meetings provide a venue for reporting on Project operational activities and keeping the public informed on future cleanup issues and developments. The long-standing local environmental group, the West Valley Coalition on Nuclear Wastes, was instrumental in establishing this public outreach venue.

*Chambers of Commerce Participation* – The Project premises are located on land in Cattaraugus County near West Valley, New York, and adjacent to the community of Springville (Erie County), New York. Because both communities have been impacted by Project's presence, WVDP representatives actively participate in both Chambers of Commerce to ensure both communities have a voice where Project impacts are concerned. Project representatives attend monthly meetings, brief attendees on site activities and issues, and take concerns back to the WVDP partner management team to seek resolution. But communications with the Chambers of Commerce are a two-way street. The Project representatives listen to community issues not directly related to the WVDP and join in efforts to resolve those issues. This proactive partnership has led to a trusting relationship that benefits both the community and the Project.

## **Educational Outreach**

The WVDP partners have developed and participated in a variety of educational outreach programs. Together, these programs have helped rural schools provide students with unique opportunities for enhanced learning, and more importantly, have helped the WVDP partners become an integral part of the community fabric.

*Mentoring and Service Learning* - WVDP employees have participated in the Mentoring and Service Learning Program at West Valley Central School since 1994. A WVDP mentor is paired with a student for an entire year, working in weekly sessions to help the student develop their educational and social skills. More than 370 students have benefited from this program with WVDP mentors.

*Educational Horizons Program* – High-achieving seniors from two local high schools were given opportunities to be challenged beyond the classroom. These students were partnered with WVDP employees and given real work assignments, guidance on how to complete the assignment, and feedback on performance. Initiated originally to accommodate students who needed more challenges than the school could provide, the program has helped many students prepare for future careers in the sciences.

*WVDP Academic Achievement Awards* -Students who excel in the study of Earth Science, Biology, Chemistry and Physics are recognized for their achievement.

*WVES Scholarships* - Four seniors from two area high schools receive \$250 scholarships from WVES. Students are selected by the school based on academic achievement, acceptance into a four-year degree program at an accredited college or university in a science or engineering curriculum, and financial need.

*In-Class Presentations* - WVDP employees provide presentations on the cleanup work, nuclear waste, radiation and radiation safety at area schools on a regular basis.

*Career Days* – Juniors and seniors in high school often aren't sure what field of study to pursue in college for the career that follows. The workers at the WVDP partners have participated in a number of high school career days that have helped students get a better idea of what a career in the nuclear and environmental cleanup field is like.

*Traveling Technology Exhibit* - This rolling travel trailer was transformed into an interactive technology exhibit (see Figure 2) and used for off-site presentations, primarily at schools in the Western New York area. The trailer was designed for hands-on learning and included a Geiger counter, glove box and suit-up materials. It even had a robotic arm that students could use to get a sense of the challenge of working remotely.



*Figure 2. The Traveling Technology Exhibit brings the message to the stakeholders.*

### **Community Service**

The WVDP is an integral part of the local and regional communities. In addition to working hard to clean up the environment, the WVDP partners also work hard to help improve the communities through a variety of service projects.

*Food and Clothing Drive* – Nearly one million pounds of food have been donated to local food pantries and the regional food bank by WVDP employees. The annual food drive is kicked off with a Diversity Luncheon, a tradition that combines a celebration of diversity, excellent food and generous donations. Employees have also donated gently used office apparel to the EveryWoman's Opportunity Center, an organization that assists men and women who are entering the workforce and are in need of professional office attire.

*United Way* – United Way agencies serve people in their time of need and WVDP employees have consistently risen to the challenge of raising money in support of the United Way mission. Since 1994, WVDP employees have donated more than \$1 million for the Cattaraugus and Erie County United Way organizations. But employees give more than just their cash, they give their time. Every year Project employees conduct two major community improvement projects – one in each county – to make a difference in the lives of the people in the area.

*Adopt-A Family* – For the past five years, employees have adopted 12 Cattaraugus County families in need, providing family gifts for the holiday season. Infants to 18-year-olds receive wrapped gifts from anonymous givers. One of the most recent additions to community giving, it's also one of the most popular.

*Ride for Roswell* – As a team, the West Valley Glow Riders have ridden thousands of miles and raised thousands of dollars as part of the annual fundraising bike ride for cancer research. The proceeds of the ride go to the Roswell Park Memorial Cancer Institute in Buffalo.

*JPMorgan – Chase Corporate Challenge* – WVDP runners and walkers act as ambassadors for the Project at the annual run sponsored by JPMorgan-Chase. Registration fees are donated to local charities and participants exchange information about their respective companies and missions.

## Media Relations

Working closely with, and being responsive to, newspaper, radio and television correspondents has provided numerous opportunities to share information about the cleanup project with a broader audience. The positive working relationships that have developed between the WVDP communications staff and news correspondents in the area help ensure the information being reported is accurate and timely.

*Editorial Board Meetings* – Editorial board meetings have been held with The Buffalo News, the region’s largest daily print media outlet, with updates on the status of the Project. These sessions have been used to revitalize public interest in and support for the Project, as well as to inform the media of pending complex issues that required more than a press release or media advisory.

*Press Releases/Conferences* – Like other sites, the WVDP issues press releases and media advisories to announce significant accomplishments, major decisions, public and media events, etc. The WVDP has held press conferences infrequently, reserving this medium for major announcements such as the 1996 Draft EIS.

*Media Events* – Over the years, the WVDP has held numerous media events to mark the Project’s milestones. Most recently, the Project partners invited the Western New York Media to participate in an event titled, “The Way Ahead – A New Era at the WVDP.” The purpose of this event was twofold. The first objective was to celebrate employee efforts in the successful completion of Project accomplishments – in particular the safe successful shipment of nearly 20,000 drums of low-level radioactive waste for offsite disposal. Secondly, it was to highlight the agreement in principle for moving the project forward among the agencies involved in the Draft EIS.

Members of the WNY media were invited to attend the event and were afforded the opportunity to interview EPA Region 2 Administrator Alan Steinberg and DOE Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management James Rispoli on *The Way Ahead* for the WVDP, which included a preferred alternative for the long-awaited Draft EIS.

## Public Participation

The WVDP partners have created a unique opportunity for stakeholders to provide advice on future cleanup decisions that could impact the local and regional communities.

*West Valley Citizen Task Force (CTF)* – During the development of the DEIS in 1996, NYSERDA perceived a need for broader public participation, above and beyond the

### CTF Diversity

- Business Owner (West Valley Hardware)
- Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes
- Cattaraugus County Department of Health
- Erie County Commissioner of Environment and Planning
- Environmentalist
- International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
- League of Women Voters
- Bertrand-Chaffee Hospital, NYS Academy of Family Physicians
- Office of NYS Assemblyman Joe Giglio
- Office of NYS Senator Cathy Young
- Seneca Nation of Indians
- Town of Ashford Supervisor
- Town of Ashford Councilman
- Town of Concord Councilman
- University of Buffalo, Great Lakes Program
- Village of Gowanda Wastewater Treatment Facility, Cattaraugus Creek Basin Task Force
- West Valley American Legion
- West Valley Chamber of Commerce
- West Valley Central School Board
- West Valley Volunteer Hose Company

Figure 3. The 18-member CTF represents multiple local organizations.

public comments on the DEIS to help in the development of a closure option for the Center. Forming a community advisory group seemed to be the best way to ensure that the issues and concerns of the community were understood. To make this a reality, NYSERDA first obtained the support of DOE. The CTF was convened in January 1997, to provide NYSERDA and DOE direction and advice on the development of a preferred alternative for the final cleanup. The CTF currently has 18 members representing diverse organizations (see Figure 3).

The CTF met twice a month for the first 18 months, becoming thoroughly immersed in learning about the site and the long-term closure/management options under consideration. Project partners presented information on a wide range of topics, targeted to assist Task Force members with becoming well-informed about the site history, radiological hazards, site facilities, and the four alternatives under consideration.

In July 1998, the CTF submitted their recommendations to DOE and NYSERDA in the *West Valley Citizen Task Force Final Report*. In the years since, the CTF has expanded its mission to include participation in the NRC Policy Statement for Decontamination and Decommissioning at West Valley; long-term stewardship; and future land use options.

The CTF is different from other citizen advisory groups in the DOE complex. Unlike DOE-structured Citizen Advisory Boards (CABs), the CTF has maintained a disciplined focus on long-term cleanup options and activities, rather than focusing on day-to-day operations. Also, the WVCTF has no term limits and no designated chair.

Despite an expected 18-month commitment of time on the part of CTF members, this group continues to meet and provide stakeholder feedback to the State of New York and DOE. As the group has no term limits, six members are from the original group, dedicating 12 years to the process.

*Deer Hunting Program* In response to requests from the Town of Ashford and the general public, NYSERDA implemented an unusual community recreation program: deer hunting. For over 30 years, the 13.5-square kilometer (3,345-acre) Western New York Nuclear Service Center had not been accessible to hunters due to the reprocessing operations. By the early 1990s, the Wildlife Bureau of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) estimated the deer population to be twice that of the surrounding area. Recognizing the need to reduce the deer herd, NYSERDA opened the site for deer hunting in 1994.

The program is held on approximately 2,000 acres of the Center (see Figure 4). On average, 300 hunters participate each year and harvest between 40-75 deer. There are multiple benefits realized through this program. First, hunters assist with the reduction of the deer population which had grown beyond manageable numbers and which were creating safety hazards for drivers in the area. Second, prospective hunters are required to go through an application process, which educates them on the Project as well as the rules of the deer hunting program. Lastly, NYSERDA offers radioactive analysis of the deer taken, which assures hunters that the venison they would be eating and feeding their families is safe. All of these

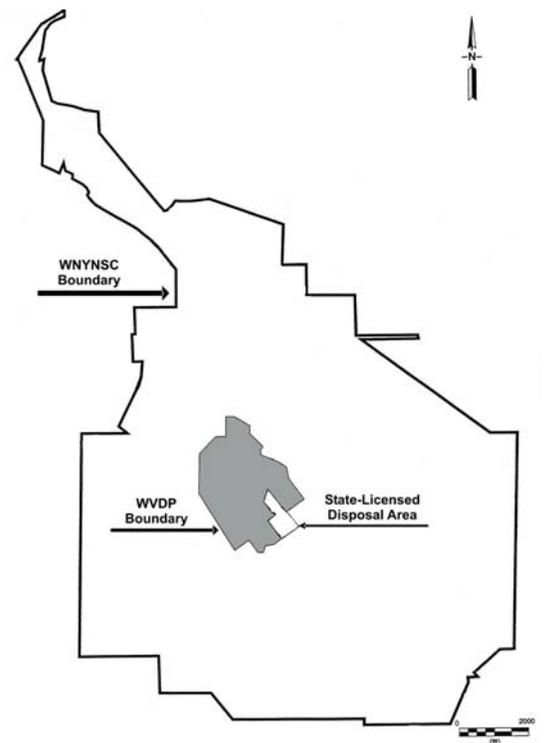


Figure 4. The WVDP is surrounded by the Western New York Nuclear Service Center.

factors contribute to enhancing public confidence that the Project is being conducted safely.

## **TRIUMPHS AND CHALLENGES**

Communicators face many challenges in the public involvement arena. Public apathy is one challenge that requires innovative planning and implementation of a variety of activities to overcome. Getting the public involved and educated on environmental cleanup activities – even those in their own back yard – is a tough challenge, but not impossible.

At the WVDP, public interest was high during the early- and mid-1990s, during the days of high-tech high-level waste vitrification. Attendance at public meetings, the open houses, and site tours and offsite presentations were well attended and engendered significant public participation. However, as vitrification operations concluded, the cleanup turned toward lower-tech operations, and the future of the site was uncertain, public interest began to wane. Informal feedback from stakeholders indicated that the local community was saturated with information about the Project.

In sharp contrast to the waning interest from the general public, the Citizen Task Force has displayed commendable sustained interest for a dozen years. Members have expressed a commitment to the process and have been supportive of the Project as it has worked its way through its technical, legal and political issues. The Task Force has been diligent in its pursuit of a successful resolution of long-term site management issues.

Project communicators must struggle against community apathy to assure that the long-term decisions that are made are based on solid community understanding and support. As Robert Kennedy once said,

*“The future does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic toward common problems and their fellow man alike, timid and fearful in the face of bold projects and new ideas. Rather, it will belong to those who can blend passion, reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideals of American society.”*

Thoughts from Brooksie  
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