

Citizen Gain: ***The Story of the West Valley Citizen Task Force***

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the managers of nuclear waste cleanup sites have expended a great deal of time and energy to enhance public involvement in site operations. The question that we, as site managers, have to ask ourselves is, has it been worth the effort? And, if it has, what have we learned from the experience? At the Western New York Nuclear Service Center (Center), the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) learned some valuable lessons while working with a community advisory group.

*In January 1997, NYSERDA, with participation from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), brought 16 individuals of diverse background, experience, and interest together to formulate recommendations on the development of a preferred option for closing and/or managing the facilities at the Center. The **West Valley Citizen Task Force** began meeting twice a month. From the outset, NYSERDA and DOE were committed to finding out what was important to the community regarding the future management of the site, though, at the beginning, the Task Force was wary of the sincerity of this commitment .*

In July 1998, 19 months since its first meeting, the Task Force submitted a recommendations report to NYSERDA and DOE containing its policies and priorities regarding the future management of the site and specific guidelines for the closure option. All 16 members of the Task Force signed the report. The completion of the report indicates the success of one part of the process -- the consensus of the Task Force regarding the future management of the Center.

Next, NYSERDA and DOE must forge ahead to address their recommendations in the development of a cleanup plan for the site, while not discarding what has been gained along the way, which is a deeper, more trusting relationship with the Task Force members. Their recommendations are representative of the community's values at a given point in time. The relationships, however, are dynamic and, with good faith already established, provide the greatest opportunity for developing an even deeper level of trust with the community.

In this paper, the details of the West Valley Citizen Task Force process will be described.

BACKGROUND

NYSERDA, a public benefit corporation established by the State Legislature in 1975, owns and manages the 3,340-acre Western New York Nuclear Service Center (Center) located about 30 miles south of Buffalo, New York (see Figure 1). The Center is home to the West Valley Demonstration Project (WVDP), a joint federal/state high-level radioactive waste cleanup project situated on about 200 acres of the Center. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) manages the WVDP, paying 90% of the project costs, while NYSERDA pays the remaining 10%. NYSERDA also has sole management



Figure 1- Aerial View of the Center

responsibility for the shut-down State-Licensed Low-level Radioactive Waste Disposal Area (SDA) located adjacent to the WVDP property.

In March 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. The DEIS provided analyses of four generic options for closing facilities and managing the Center over the long term. The options ranged from complete removal of facilities and the associated waste for off-site disposal, to stabilizing the waste in place, to managing the Center as-is and providing for long-term monitoring and maintenance. A fifth option, the hypothetical "walk-away" alternative, was also analyzed only to provide a baseline of potential long-term hazards.

During the development of the DEIS, NYSERDA perceived a need for broader public participation, above and beyond the 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, its partner in this joint DEIS and decision-making process. DOE agreed to participate and NYSERDA agreed to take the lead in managing the process.

HIRING A FACILITATOR

Prior to convening the group, and to maximize the effectiveness and credibility of a community advisory group, NYSERDA sought an independent facilitator to support the group in its mission. The responsibilities of the facilitator included:

- ◆ Consulting with individuals from the area to gain an understanding of the various community interests;
- ◆ Defining the objectives, roles, and limitations of the process;
- ◆ Recommending a process for convening the group;
- ◆ Developing ground rules, in consultation with the group, for the process;
- ◆ Taking care of logistics for the group;
- ◆ Facilitating each meeting of the group; and
- ◆ Coordinating activities with NYSERDA and DOE.

Clean Sites, Inc. was hired in October 1996 to provide the aforementioned facilitation services.

CONVENING THE TASK FORCE

Clean Sites, with the support of NYSERDA, began interviewing potential members as part of the convening process for the West Valley Citizen Task Force in November 1996. The interviews helped Clean Sites and NYSERDA to:

- ◆ Identify groups or persons with an interest in the future of the site;
- ◆ Explore their willingness to participate on, or provide input to, the Task Force;
- ◆ Discuss issues the community felt should be addressed by the Task Force; and
- ◆ Inquire about their views concerning persons, groups, or organizations that should be invited to participate on the Task Force.

NYSERDA, DOE, and Clean Sites gained a better understanding of the community's attitudes about the Task Force process. A repeated theme was that individuals didn't want to waste their time if NYSERDA and DOE were not willing to listen to the views expressed by the Task Force participants. Also, many interviewees expressed concern about the composition of the Task Force. Some expressed an unwillingness to participate if they would be subjected to personal attacks or belittled for their beliefs. Others focused more on the interests to be included on the Task Force, asserting that the site activities mostly affected local interests, and the Task Force should be represented as such. Interviewees not living in the immediate community took an opposite view and expressed the belief that downwind and downstream impacts justified a more expansive Task Force membership.

Almost all of those contacted indicated that the Task Force process should include enough time for them to:

- ◆ Understand the site and its components;
- ◆ Understand the proposed remedial options, risks, and benefits for each part of the site; and
- ◆ Discuss the options with NYSERDA and DOE in a meaningful way.

Based on the information obtained during the convening activities, Clean Sites recommended NYSERDA invite individuals from local and regional interests to serve as members of the Task Force. The interests included business/commerce, local government, Native American, environmental protection, local medical, citizens at large, and the site work force. In late December 1996, NYSERDA extended invitations to participate on the Task Force. Sixteen people, already active in numerous community organizations, agreed to participate (Figure 2).

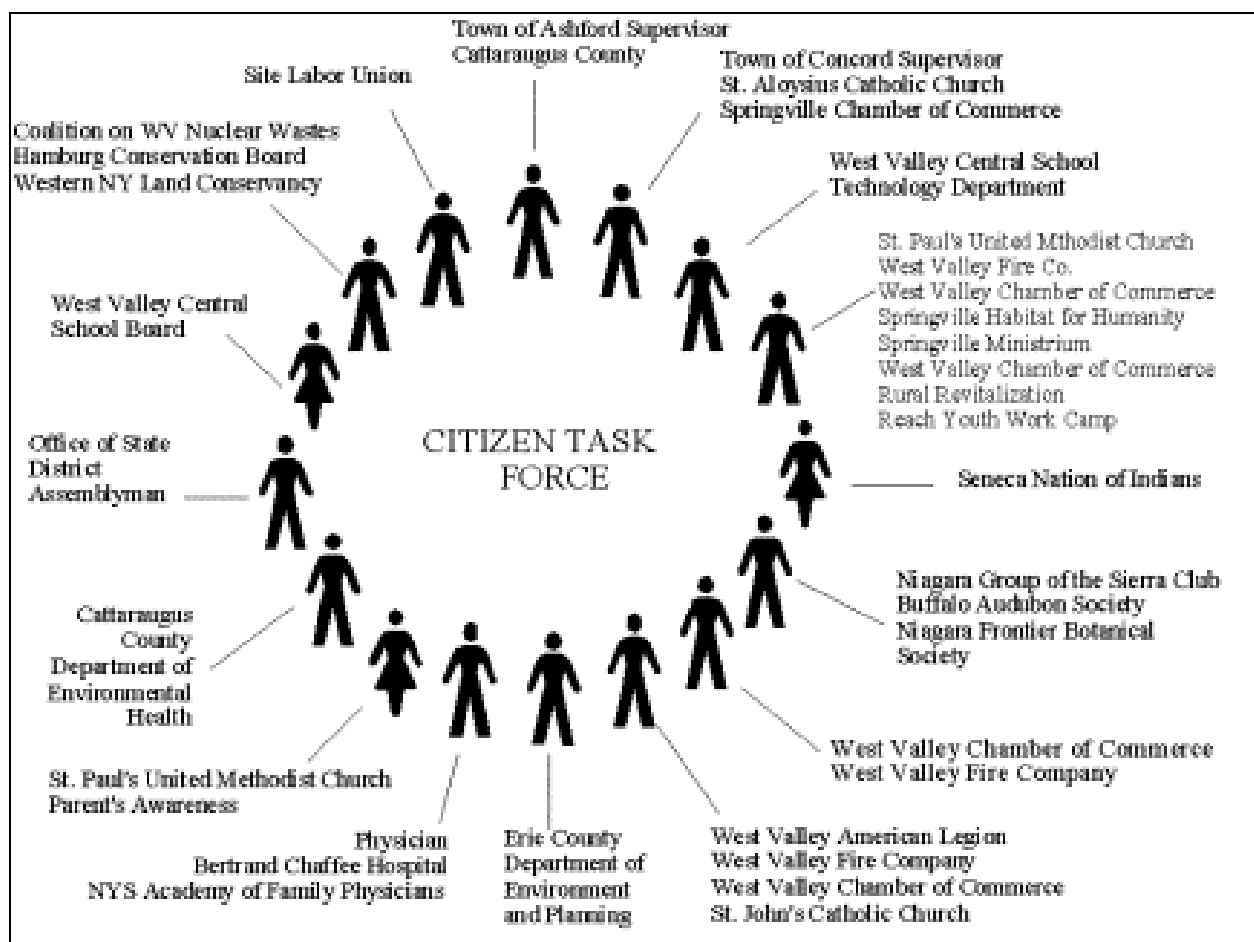


Figure 2 - Affiliations of the Citizen Task Force Members

TASK FORCE MEETINGS

The Task Force held its first meeting in late January 1997. The initial meeting was dedicated to process-type discussions necessary for getting the group started. The Task Force agreed on ground rules, set a meeting schedule, and shared what they all hoped to get out of the process. NYSERDA developed the following objective for the group which was later agreed upon by the Task Force:

...to assist in the development of a preferred alternative for the completion of the West Valley Demonstration Project and cleanup, closure and/or long-term management of the facilities at the site. (from Task Force Ground Rules)

During the first eight months, the Task Force became more knowledgeable about the site and more focused on the issues affecting NYSERDA and DOE decision making. The Task Force spent this time becoming more familiar with the 12 Waste Management Areas (WMAs) identified in the DEIS. This was accomplished through presentations by NYSERDA and DOE about the types and volumes of wastes, the engineering of the five alternatives evaluated, and the analyses of performance and cost. NYSERDA, DOE, and their contractors took the lead in this part of the process, which was mainly information sharing.

A shift in the direction of the process took place after the Task Force had spent over eight months listening to, and questioning, NYSERDA and DOE about the technical details of the site. The group had become knowledgeable about the site and were ready to take the lead in the direction of the process. At this point, the Task Force decided to move on to more informal working sessions to discuss issues important to them (see Figure 3). NYSERDA and DOE provided the Task Force with information requested and supported the group in their deliberations. The Task Force had become more of a cohesive unit (i.e. group identity) than that of a collection of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

With an increased understanding of the site, the Task Force decided to focus its discussions on those portions of the site which they believed to be the most significant and likely to drive long-term decisions. By February 1998, the Task Force started looking at the impacts of sitewide closure scenarios. To help facilitate these discussions, NYSERDA and Clean Sites, Inc. developed a table-top exercise called ConsenSite. The object of the exercise was for two players to achieve consensus (nonbinding) on a sitewide closure option. The exercise used a laminated site map and puzzle pieces to help Task Force members understand the impact of choosing the various closure options for the principal WMAs. Four members of the



Figure 3 - NYSERDA Manager Discussing Issues with Task Force

Task Force tested the exercise and felt it would be an excellent tool to stimulate sitewide closure discussions. At the next meeting, the entire Task Force played the exercise and found it particularly useful for identifying the various trade-offs that have to be made in decision making. The game also served as a catalyst for the Task Force to begin developing recommendations. A more detailed description of the ConsenSite game is provided in another paper of the WM 99 Proceedings. [See Paper #7 (of Session 57), **Visual Reality, Using a Board Game to Enhance Understanding of Cost/Benefit Decision Making**].

DRAFTING THE TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

In March 1998, the Task Force proceeded to draft recommendations for NYSERDA and DOE to consider. A subcommittee of the Task Force developed a first draft for the full group to comment on. After discussion at its next meeting, the subcommittee developed a revision of the draft and sent it to all Task Force members for comment. This cycle of draft/comment/revise continued for a period of three months, until the group had refined the document to the point where the Task Force members agreed in principle to its contents. The Task Force edited the recommendations using a computer to project the document onto a large screen during its meetings. This technology helped the group work through the recommendations and facilitated discussions about the various sections of the report.

One of the early discussions focused on whether to develop specific or general recommendations. The group opted to move forward by first developing more general recommendations, including its policies and priorities for site cleanup, thereby leaving open the opportunity for more specific recommendations at a later time. After the group completed its policies and priorities for site cleanup, they proceeded to develop guidelines for site cleanup, which consisted of general directions. At the end of this process, the Task Force members discussed providing

recommendations about specific WMAs, but the members felt that their policies, priorities, and guidelines provided sufficient advice.

In June 1998, the Task Force had agreement among all 16 members regarding the contents of the report. Fifteen of the 16 members signed the report, but one member needed formal approval of its constituents before signing. In July, the final member signed the report, and the Task Force completed its Final Recommendations Report on its policies, priorities, and guidelines for the clean up, closure, or long-term management of the Center.

THE PATH FORWARD

NYSERDA and DOE were pleased with the product developed by the Task Force. In general, both organizations felt they could work with the recommendations, especially in the form of principles, priorities, and guidelines. Some recommendations of the Task Force may be more difficult for NYSERDA and DOE to accommodate, and site managers expressed their concerns to the Task Force during the drafting phase of the recommendations. For example, the Task Force stated that "cost considerations should not be a primary factor in the development of the preferred alternative." As stewards of public funds, NYSERDA and DOE must balance both cost and risk in their decision.

The Task Force process is not over at this time. NYSERDA and DOE are carefully considering the Task Force's recommendations, regulatory agency guidance, and updated technical data and analyses to develop the preferred alternative (Figure 4). The preferred alternative is expected to be released for public review and comment in a supplement to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) in late 1999. NYSERDA and DOE have agreed to present the preferred alternative to the Task Force prior to release of the SEIS for general public comment.

Up until it submitted the Recommendations Report in July, the Task Force was meeting twice a month. They are now meeting less frequently, about once every six-to-eight weeks, to receive updates on the development of a preferred alternative for closure and long-term management of the Center.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the last two years, the Task Force met close to forty times and worked diligently to communicate the concerns of the community to NYSERDA and DOE in a variety of ways. Though taxing for both the Task Force members and the site staff, the benefits of using a process like this have far outweighed the costs. A more trusting relationship has developed between the Task Force members and the Site Managers. This development is hard to quantify, but easy to recognize as positive for the community, NYSERDA, and DOE.

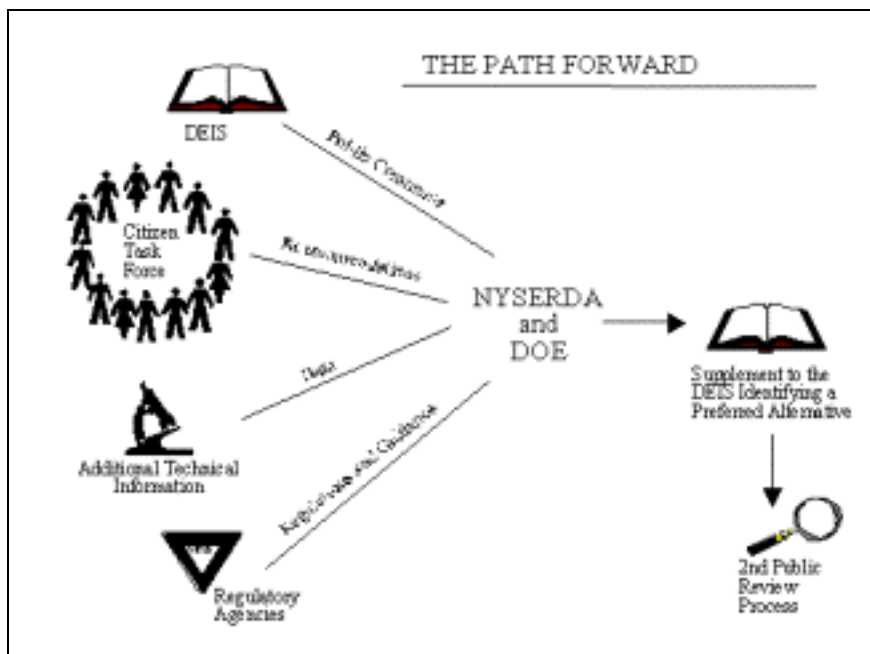


Figure 4 - Process for Decision-Making

In any process like this, there are lessons to be learned that may help others starting out in similar processes. There were three major phases of the Task Force process: convening, deliberations, and recommendations. Selecting a facilitator and convening the Task Force took six months, Task Force deliberations took fourteen months, and drafting the recommendations took five months to complete. The following is a list of lessons learned by NYSERDA during the entire process to date.

- ◆ **One-on-one talks with people in the local community are valuable to learn about the concerns, history, interests, perspectives, motivations and commitment of the people in the community.** Over 50 interviews were conducted with potential Task Force members prior to convening the group. This led to the selection of a balanced, diverse, conscientious, and motivated group.
- ◆ **Make sure not to mislead people about their possible involvement in the process.** Miscommunications with potential Task Force members left bitter impressions about fair representation on the Task Force. This affected the credibility of the process early on but was overcome as the process progressed.
- ◆ **An independent facilitator helps eliminate the “us” and “them” positioning that may take place.** Clean Sites facilitated each meeting, which afforded the Task Force members and the site managers the opportunity to discuss issues in depth without worrying about managing the process.
- ◆ **Significant credibility is gained when senior-level managers at the site participate during meetings and don’t set themselves apart from the members.** The site directors of NYSERDA and DOE made a commitment to participate in the meetings of the Task Force. During meetings, a manager from both organizations sat at the table with the Task Force during its deliberations, while the facilitator kept the meetings running.
- ◆ **It takes time for a community advisory group to become knowledgeable about the site and related issues.** It took several months for the Task Force to become aware of the technical intricacies of the site and the magnitude of the decisions to be made.
- ◆ **Sharing technical information with a community advisory group takes time and requires flexibility.** At the beginning of the process, highly technical information was shared with the Task Force in an effort to bring the members up-to-speed quickly. This overwhelmed many of the members. It was necessary to make adjustments to make the information more understandable.
- ◆ **Cater presentations at meetings to the members with the least knowledge about the issues, having more technical details available as back-up.** Most Task Force members were not trained in radioactive waste management, so the terms and jargon of the site was foreign to them. It was necessary to work to make the presentations understandable to the least knowledgeable members to make sure they were not left behind in the discussions.
- ◆ **It takes time for the community advisory group to develop its own identity.** Over the first several months of the process, the 16 Task Force members became familiar with each other through the discussions at meetings. During the discussions, the members shared their own interests and goals with the group. As the process progressed, the group discovered common ground on many issues, as well as areas of disagreement. There was a gestation period that was necessary for the Task Force to develop an identity based upon similar interests and goals.
- ◆ **Creating opportunities for informal discussions between members helps the community advisory group to become a more cohesive unit, work through difficult issues, and focus on where it is headed.** Early in the process, the Task Force held several caucuses to discuss the information they were getting from NYSERDA and DOE. The caucuses were closed-door meetings which allowed members to discuss issues without having to be concerned about NYSERDA and DOE influences. This proved helpful in bringing the members closer together on issues as well as pointing the group in the direction they wanted to head.
- ◆ **Refreshments at community advisory group meetings promote a less formal environment and help build positive relationships and good will between the members and site personnel.** At every meeting of the Task Force, cookies, chips, coffee, tea, and water were set out on a table for everyone in attendance. The food and beverages were greatly appreciated and provided a focal point for meeting breaks. Instead of heading out of the room on a break, many people had

something to eat and drink, and began informal discussions with others. Oftentimes, members came to meetings directly from their jobs without having dinner. The refreshments helped keep their energy levels up during the meetings.

- ◆ **Technical subcommittees of a community advisory group provide a useful outlet for discussing issues with the members that were more interested in technical details.** On several occasions, the Task Force held special technical work group meetings to discuss specific issues with the technical staff members at the site. These meetings provided opportunities for meaningful discussions on topics such as in-place high-level waste tank closure, groundwater plume remediation, and erosion control measures.
- ◆ **It is important to look for, and respond to, indications that a community advisory group feels the need to chart its own course in the process.** When the Task Force had been given enough technical information, they let NYSERDA and DOE know they wanted to control the process for a while. NYSERDA and DOE obliged. This allowed the Task Force to define their role in the decision-making process, which helped establish mutual trust and credibility.
- ◆ **It is easier for a community advisory group to reach consensus on general recommendations, than specific ones.** The Task Force began developing its recommendations with the intention of defining the specific closure option for each area of the site. This proved to be a difficult and divisive strategy. The Task Force chose to take another approach, attempting to seek agreement on more general issues before proceeding to more specific recommendations. This led the Task Force to define its principles and priorities for site clean-up, which provided a framework of the values of the community. They proceeded to develop guidelines for clean-up, which provided the expectations and preferences for taking certain actions. The Task Force discussed providing more specific recommendations about each area of the site, but felt it was not necessary because it was already covered in the policies, priorities and guidelines.
- ◆ **The development of positive relationships between community advisory group members is a by-product of a public process.** Some members of the Task Force, were initially uncomfortable with having to work with certain other individuals who, traditionally, had not shared the same opinions. However, as the group began meeting, the Task Force members were able to share their opinions openly, in a structured, non-threatening forum, thereby promoting discourse. This allowed for more understanding of each members' interests and values, which in many cases, were quite similar.

In the end, NYSERDA, DOE, and Clean Sites believe the Citizen Task Force process has been well worth the effort expended. We believe the involvement of the Citizen Task Force, and the breadth of their recommendations, will significantly improve the quality of the decisions we have to make.