

Need for EPA ombudsman not clear-cut in Lake landfill case

Thursday, July 25, 2002

By KELLY HILL Repository staff writer

LAKE TWP. — Robert Martin handled citizens' complaints about how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency handles waste and Superfund sites, such as the Industrial Excess Landfill in Uniontown.

Since late 2000, Martin's office has been in upheaval. First, it looked like he was going to get more resources. Then Martin was cut off from his chief investigator and reassigned to the Inspector General's Office, which is a U.S. EPA branch that investigates fraud and mismanagement within the agency.

Martin said he was being silenced for criticizing top EPA officials, including Director Christine Todd Whitman.

He resigned.

Congressional hearings recently were held to review Martin's position and possible reinstatement.

During those hearings, the Uniontown dump was held up by the Project on Government Oversight, a national watchdog group, as a perfect example of why Martin needed to be reinstated: the lingering questions, controversy and the lack of trust in U.S. EPA.

Locals involved with the landfill don't necessarily agree.

"One would hope that one would not have to have a double-check. There may be instances, and I understand there have been, where things fell between the cracks and (Martin) came in and saved the day," Township Trustee Sue Ruley said.

But the township is working with the companies and the U.S. and Ohio EPAs — so it's Ruley's opinion that Martin isn't needed, at least in Uniontown.

But if Martin is fighting to preserve his job, she pointed out, won't he be looking even harder for places to intervene?

Martin conducted a two-year preliminary review of how the U.S. EPA dealt with the Industrial Excess Landfill. His report called for further study of the site, including some digging and better off-site monitoring; and forming a group with representatives from U.S. and Ohio EPAs, the companies, the township and Concerned Citizens to deal with landfill-related issues.

Additional testing has been done, but no digging and no additional off-site wells.

"There's plenty for Mr. Martin to do," retorted Chris Borello, president of grassroots group Concerned Citizens of Lake Township. Most important, she said, is reviewing questionable testing at the site.

"It requires someone with objectivity, with no past involvement here, that has no vested interests in the outcome, financial or otherwise.

“We’re seeing the government holding major corporations accountable,” Borello added. “I think that we’re starting to see accountability in the ... agencies that are supposed to be the go-betweens between the public and the corporations. They’re the first line of defense. If they are above the law, then that whole process of protecting the public health and the environment is in jeopardy.”

“I don’t think (ombudsman intervention) was necessary at this site,” said Paul Wolford, who represents four of the companies responsible for the landfill cleanup. “I think there has been tremendous cooperation among the federal and state EPA and the township trustees representing the community and with the four companies.”

“I think if Bob Martin came in and was ... being advised by an entity other than the Lake Township trustees, I’m not sure that would be a positive thing,” Wolford added.

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