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Home Opinion

OUR VIEW: Arm twisting gets the job done in Middleport

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Another round of arsenic reduction will get underway in Middleport this summer, as soon as the Royalton Hartland Central School District board of education consents to the state Department of Environmental Conservation commissioning another big dig on the main campus.

Regardless how controversial DEC's overall arsenic reduction plan is in Middleport, there's little doubt the school board will consent, when it convenes tonight, to having an athletic field dug up and replaced with "clean" soil. The State of New York being what it is, the district has no choice.

DEC's recommended method of reducing arsenic levels in soil is removal and replacement — lots of it. It's become controversial in Middleport because it puts a large burden on property owners and the community, and that burden is borne for a disproportionately small benefit. Lawns and trees are dug up, heavy machinery ties up and grinds away at village streets, and the community is under siege psychologically as home is labeled a "contaminated" place in need of "remediation." What public health risks are posed by elevated arsenic levels that justify big digs? Citizens point to a lack of research linking arsenic levels like those seen in Middleport to any chronic or catastrophic illness and DEC's response is along the lines of: "Arsenic is bad. Trust us. We know what's best."

Cynics will be forgiven for thinking what the environmental police know best is how to spend FMC Corp.'s money. The agricultural chemical products maker struck an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency years ago to clean up after itself in Middleport and DEC is in charge of deciding how it will do that. Remediation is a multi-phase project and in the latest phase, which involves the school and roughly 180 other properties, DEC has ordered a \$70 million big dig. FMC is suing, claiming arsenic reduction goals could be met with considerably less digging and for about one-third of the price.

While DEC claims property owners are free to opt out of the big dig, that's not really true for the Roy Hart district. School trustees know that if they don't consent to remediation, future capital projects on "contaminated" land may not be approved by the state education department. Any future sale of district property could be thwarted by the same. Bottom line: the district can accept remediation on DEC's terms and FMC's dime now, or pay a price later.

Such is informed "consent" according to our state environmental police.

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