

Residents question ash plan at Retsof salt mine

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

RETSOF — A proposal to use the Retsof salt mines as a depository for approximately four tons a day of hardened incinerator ash is drawing opposition from some Livingston County residents — including members of the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard.

Because of their concerns over a proposed plan to bring trainloads of municipal incinerator ash for use as back fill in the mine, abbey members hosted a Sept. 12 conference on the issue for area church representatives.

Entitled "Claiming Our Land as a Sacred Place," the conference addressed concerns about the plan from both religious and environmental perspectives.

Approximately 50 people attended the program, which was sponsored by the abbey and Protect A Clean Environment (PACE), a Livingston County-based environmental group.

As a result of the conference, participants formed an ecumenical task force on the environment to address concerns about the ash proposal, according to Father Daniel O'Shea, one of the event's organizers and an abbey resident.

"There is wide environmental concern (over the proposal)," Father O'Shea noted. "We believe it will have a drastic effect on the local area and will have a negative impact on the abbey in terms of the noise level with the rail traffic."

But officials of AKZO, the corporation that owns the mine, are seeking to reassure area residents that the plan to bring the ash to the Retsof facility will not pose a danger to neighbors of the mine.

"The principle of isolating wastes in salt mines is established both in the United States and in other countries," said Larry Milliken, AKZO's director of storage projects, during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "Ash has typically been landfilled, and studies have shown that the material in a natural environment does not behave as a leachate (leaking into the environment)."

Milliken noted that the plan calls for the ash to be combined with waste water from the mine as well as lime and cement kiln dust, then pumped into the mine. It will then be used to fill empty cavities in the mine, which



S. John Wilkins/Photo Intern
Catholic Courier staff writer Lee Strong (left) speaks with Ken Cox, manager of the Retsof Salt Mine, during a tour 1,100 feet underground in the Livingston County mine. Mine officials have proposed a controversial plan to backfill mine cavities with hardened incinerator ash.

covers approximately 10 square miles 1,100 feet beneath the surface.

The mixture will harden into a cement-like compound in those cavities, helping to stabilize the mine, Milliken said. This will enable AKZO to continue to expand its operations, including mining a lower strata of salt, he added.

The process as well as the hardened ash product are currently getting tested, Milliken reported. In fact, he said, a breakwater and a boathouse made of hardened ash are currently undergoing testing at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Further, Milliken noted, AKZO plans to build a demonstration project in Leicester, located near the mine, to test the process for producing the hardened ash on a large scale. The company is also designing a sealed railroad car to transport material to the mine.

The project will not go ahead until these studies and tests have been completed, Milliken noted.

The studies, applications for approval for the project by local and state officials, and construction of the plant to process the materials, could push

the start-up date for the project to four-to-five years from now, Milliken observed.

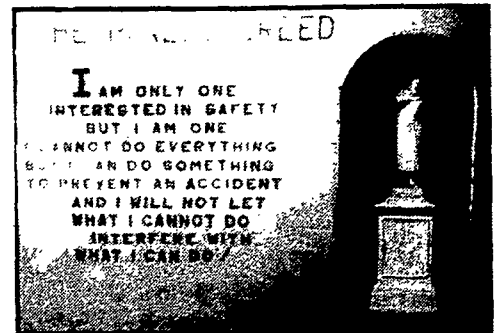
Although some residents are concerned about potential health risks from the ash, Ken Cox, the mine's plant manager, observed, "By state standards, by (Environmental Protection Agency) standards, this is not hazardous material."

But many people are not convinced of the project's safety simply because the material is not considered hazardous, noted Glenda Van Ry, president of PACE.

"Incineration really has only been used in the United States for a very limited time," Van Ry observed. "Regulations and standards haven't really been set for much of this."

Van Ry said, among other issues, residents are concerned with the safety of transporting the ash by train to the mine, of unloading the railroad cars, and of the material's processing before it is piped down into the mine. She pointed out that accidents along the way or contact with the material could pose danger to county residents or to workers.

Milliken noted that the material



A Sentinels of Safety Award adorns the entrance to the main shaft. The award is sponsored by the American Mining Congress and the Labor Department's Mine Safety and Health Administration.

would be transported in sealed railroad cars. And because it would be wet, the ash could not escape into the air as dust in the event of an accident as long as the ash was cleared away quickly. At the plant, he said, the cars would be emptied in a sealed building and workers would have little chance to be contaminated.

Even if the ash were deemed dangerous at some point in the future, Milliken said, disposing of it in the mine would be safer than the current practice of disposing of it in landfills.

"If 20 or 30 years from now (the ash) is found to be hazardous, it would be permanently encased in cement 1,100 feet down totally isolated from the biosphere," Milliken said. "Would you rather have the ash away from people encased in cement 1,100 feet underground, or would you rather have it in a landfill?"

Van Ry, however, noted that no one could give assurances that the material would remain underground in the mine.

"I don't know if anyone is brave enough to say that it will never reach the surface," she said.

Father O'Shea pointed out that another objection to using the mine for ash disposal is that it would discourage finding alternative ways to deal with waste.

"This could be a disincentive to people to recycle," Father O'Shea observed.

Cox pointed out, however, that the mine could only accommodate a limited amount of ash.

"It does have a limit to its size," he said. "It could be a way to handle some of the waste product, but we're going to be limited in how much we can take."

Busing confusion decreased numbers at new school

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GATES — The Archangel School opened its doors at the Rochester Christian Academy, 1612 Buffalo Road, this month with four students — about eight fewer than the school's principal had expected to enroll.

However, principal and founder Michael Macaluso Jr. contended that the school would eventually regain most of the students, who were lost due to confusion over school busing.

Archangel is a private school independent of the Diocese of Rochester. According to its founders, the institution emphasizes "authentic" Catholic teaching.

Occupying five rooms in the Christian academy's building, Archangel was established this fall with the hope of accommodating 12 students following initial registrations during the summer.

According to Macaluso, a number of

parents withdrew their children from Archangel because their home school districts would not guarantee the availability of busing to the school.

But according to Peter F. Kuehn, administrative assistant with the Gates-Chili Central School District, the parents' school districts could not guarantee busing because Archangel was not certified until Sept. 8.

Kuehn noted that private schools must meet certain minimum state requirements in order to be certified as on par with local public schools.

Kuehn claimed that Gates-Chili did not even know Archangel desired certification until about Sept. 1. Despite the short notice, Kuehn said he worked diligently to speed up the certification process.

Macaluso claimed, however, that one of Archangel's staff members contacted the district in July to inform them of the school's desire for information on certification.

He added that Archangel's founders

were somewhat unclear about what certification requirements they had to fulfill because they believed certain aspects of certification — such as fire safety — had already been fulfilled by the Rochester Christian Academy.

"The matter of the fact is that we were new at the game," Macaluso said of the confusion. "I think we could do this in half the time we took if we were to do this again."

And do it again they might, Macaluso said, adding that supporters of Archangel may repeat the effort elsewhere in the diocese, especially in quadrants where Catholic schools have closed in recent years.

"For various reasons, not everybody is satisfied with the consolidation effort," the principal stated, commenting on the creation of quadrant schools. "Not everyone re-entered the Catholic system."

A school like Archangel offers Catholic parents an alternative to the public school system, Macaluso said. At the

same time, he and his staff added, Archangel appeals to school parents who are uncomfortable with Catholic catechism as it is currently taught in diocesan Catholic schools.

Such adherence to tradition attracted Brockport resident Nela Kirincic, whose daughter and son make up half of Archangel's current student body. Kirincic termed diocesan Catholic schools too "liberal" because they no longer use such texts as the *Baltimore Catechism*, the standard catechetical text used in elementary schools prior to Vatican II.

In addition to parents like Kirincic, Archangel expects to recruit some families who have been educating their children at home, Macaluso explained.

Eventually, he said, school officials expect 12 to 15 students to enroll by the end of the school year, including some new registrants and others who were initially scared off by the busing confusion.