

Dear Editor,

William L. Ross, chairman of the Niagara County Legislature, recently made an extended statement in which he listed what he perceived to be homeland security risks in Niagara County. He is to be applauded for this public highlighting of our target-rich area, though some of his remarks were questionable, and yet others, intended to be reassuring based on Niagara County's Strategic Security Plan, were not reassuring at all. What he neglected to say was also troubling.

We agree with Ross when he points out that the New York Power Authority generating plant on the side of the Niagara gorge could be a "prime target for terrorists," and that our international bridges increase "the potential for a major incident." Less convincing is his statement that the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Base is "a prime target for terrorism activity" while it is also equipped with "highly trained personnel" capable of reacting "to any terrorism situation" and of bringing "any force needed...to maintain a sound protection capability in the shortest possible time." Unless, however, the base is equipped with fighter interceptor planes ready to scramble twenty-four hours a day (and it is not) then the base isn't equipped to deal with "any terrorism situation," and that should be glaringly obvious to anyone with a memory of recent terrorism on American soil.

It is puzzling to the point of being ridiculous when Ross says that Niagara County's industry of "agriculture" would be a target of terrorism. Will swarms of al-Qaida suicide bombers assault our corn fields and apple orchards? Our farmer's markets? Will they release an even more virulent plum pox virus than the strain we already have? In any case, it seems unlikely that the County Strategic Plan for homeland security, so highly praised by Ross, will protect farmers any more than it will anyone else.

The Niagara County Strategic Plan was provided by Ecology and Environment, Inc. to the Niagara County Homeland Security Steering Committee in July 2005. The bottom line is this: it's long on response and short on prevention. Response is rushing in after the explosion to mop up and gather the pieces of victims; prevention is stopping the explosion, or at least reducing the risk of it happening. Prevention isn't a radical new idea. Most of us have heard of Smokey the Bear.

In the euphemistic language of Chairman Ross, the horrific destruction of the Twin Towers would be called a "major incident." Nearly seven years after this "incident," the Niagara County Security Plan fails to reduce, or to even recognize, the potential for such an "incident" at the New York Power Authority generating plant in the Niagara gorge. Traffic crosses the entire length of this generating facility on the Robert Moses Parkway which, incidentally, also permits this traffic to drive directly under the Niagara County end of the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge to Canada. There's just enough room under the bridge so that an eighteen wheeler or a tour bus or a huge Ryder truck could roll snugly into place. Is this recognized as a threat? Apparently not. But terrorists in the tomato fields, now, that's another story.

The Niagara Heritage Partnership (NHP) attempted to introduce power plant vulnerability as an issue during the relicensing process, but failed. We also failed to get the attention of elected state officials and the NYS Office of Homeland Security. Our attempts have been documented in "Homeland Security at the NYPA," and in "Comment of Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement for Niagara River Greenway" (paragraphs 17-20), which I signed, both of which are available at www.niagaraheritage.org. (We also respond here to the charge that we bring up this issue merely to advance our parkway removal agenda.)

While the NHP has failed to bring attention to this issue, we're not alone in our failure. The NYS Power Authority has failed to show interest in pursuing the subject. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission failed to require a thorough homeland security assessment and verifiable action plan be implemented as part of relicensing deliberations. The stakeholders involved in NYPA relicensing talks--environmental, industrial, and union groups, state agencies, villages, cities, towns, school districts, counties, and others--all failed, either to recognize homeland security as an issue or to successfully insist that it be a topic of negotiations. The Office of State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, by its inexplicable failure to move toward total gorge parkway removal between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY, silently endorses continued traffic over the power plant and under the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge. The Niagara Falls Bridge Commission has failed to act in their own or the public interest. Elected officials and others have failed to take notice, let alone action. The newspapers of WNY have failed to examine the issue, either on the initiative of individual journalists or by editorial encouragement of investigative journalism. The local news programs of WNY television networks have also failed, as have our radio talk shows, to explore this topic of our infrastructure vulnerabilities. This is a monumental collective denial that has arisen out of irresponsibility, ignorance, indifference, and political concerns of little merit. There may also be other explanations. We're eager to hear them.

In the meantime, we hope the plan is, as Ross says, "a living document that will be revised and amended as necessary in order to ensure that it continually reflects the county's current needs for emergency preparedness and the course of action that will be taken to meet those critical needs." If so, there's still a chance that someone will realize that allowing traffic to drive across the face of the power plant and beneath the underbelly of the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge isn't a good idea. Then the necessary "course of action" will be clear.

Sincerely,

Bob Baxter
Conservation Chair
Niagara Heritage Partnership