

Small towns are taking aim against

You can huff and puff or demonstrate or simply wring your hands. Or, in the best of traditions, you can take it to town meeting and pass an ordinance.

So they did in Kent. Several, in fact.

One ordinance says that if anyone orders a low-level radioactive waste site to be put in that small community in the Northwest Corner of the state, it can only be located in areas zoned commercial-industrial. Sounds reasonable enough. Now, if the only places so zoned just happen to be in the middle of the tiny town center, somewhere mighty unlikely to be acceptable for such a thing, well, that's the breaks.

Another, passed last week, decrees that the town wants nothing whatever to do with radioactive waste, thank you very much, and doesn't even want it driven across the community without advance notice.

While the ultimate effectiveness of all this remains to be seen, it is no small matter to Kent — or many other communities — that they stand up to something that they think is

a really bad idea.

"This is not a symbolic gesture, we mean it," says Jeff Rubin, one of the spark plugs behind the Kent effort to decline any consideration as a site for storing radioactive waste. Although there is nothing to suggest that Kent is any more a candidate for the honor than any other town, folks out there believe the clock is ticking.

In the next few days, the state is to announce the three finalists in a federally mandated effort to designate a site for low-level radioactive waste. It is a distinction that no one particularly wants to win, no matter how vigorously it is argued that such a facility would be safe and sound.

"Our basic premise is that there is no safe way to contain this waste," Rubin says. "I believe there is no site in Connecticut to contain this safely from humans forever. The technology is simply not there. These are surely lethal substances likely to be detrimental to our health. I don't think someone who hasn't even been elected has a right



Denis Horgan

to tell me that I have to have something lethal and dangerous in my town."

Winsted, East Lyme and New Haven have passed similar ordinances. Cornwall voters meet this week to consider an even broader resolution, defining the town as a "nuclear-free zone" — banning every form of manufacture, storage and shipment of such materials — a measure only Salisbury has in effect. Would any of this stand up in court? Maybe not. Probably not.

"That's really not the issue," says Charlene LaVoie, a Winsted attorney who has advised citizen activists on the matter. "The issue is, 'Do citizens want nuclear waste?'"

a nuclear presence

Can we take back our own destiny into our own hands? We're not having a say in what happens to this — any more than we had a say in how it was generated in the first place.

"No one asked our opinion when they started making nuclear reactors and now they're not asking our opinion when they determine where the radioactive garbage is supposed to go," she says. "Well, I think there's a message going out from the citizens that industry and government can't ignore. They had better deal with the people. If not, there'll be some legislators looking for new jobs. People have forgotten that the citizens have some power, too. People have forgotten that, and the bureaucrats have forgotten it. We hope this will remind them."

Rubin and LaVoie appreciate the dilemma we are in. However we got here, we have a lot of stuff that has to be dealt with. Theirs is not exactly the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) syndrome nor the NOPE (Not on the Planet Earth) syndrome either. Even as it is believed unlikely that the site would be

located in their region, they are trying to deliver a message.

"We're trying to make people think about the generation of the radioactive garbage," LaVoie says. "There's nowhere to hide, one way or another we're going to get clobbered. The citizens are getting the raw end of the deal. As usual."

"These materials should be kept at the source, rather than distributed around the landscape," says Rubin. "They made it, let them keep it until someone figures out a truly safe, long-term way to handle it. They should have done that in the first place."

"They should understand that this is not the voice of a few industrialists or a few bureaucrats. This is the voice of the community, registered in town meeting."

In the best New England tradition.

"And, in the best New England tradition," Rubin says, "the only one who objected was a fellow who said he agreed with the purpose but he just didn't want any more ordinances. He said we have too many already."