Blowing the whistle on Vermont Yankee


Arnie and Maggie Gundersen came to the Statehouse last week to detail the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant and its grounds.

Sitting before a legislative committee, Arnie Gundersen described each well and their proximity to the Connecticut River and to underground pipes.

After all, it is Arnie Gundersen who months ago pointed out that the plant appeared to have underground pipes even though company representatives had told state officials it did not.

It is Arnie Gundersen who sounded an alarm about the plant’s cooling towers not long before they crumpled.

It is Arnie Gundersen who raised the issue in 2007 that Vermont Yankee’s decommissioning fund would eventually shut the plant down, a claim the company denied at the time but later conceded would need to be funded.

“Arnie Gundersen is the only person who’s been right about Vermont Yankee every time,” said Senate President Pro Tempore Shumlin, D-Windham, who two years ago appointed Gundersen to an oversight panel to study Vermont Yankee's continued operation. Since then, the Legislature’s Joint Fiscal Office has contracted Fairewinds Associates, Inc. for up to $47,000.

Although the Legislature — and by extension the public — has come to rely on Arnie Gundersen to help inside the Vernon nuclear power plant, Public Service Commissioner David O’Brien bristles at the very name.

O’Brien contends Gundersen’s warnings have not been as on the mark as some would suggest, is eager with accusatory questions.

“We’ve always responded to Arnie in a timely manner. That’s always been met with accusations,” O’Brien said in an accusatory mode, accusing us of not being forthcoming. That makes it very hard to operate.”

How did this 61-year-old former nuclear engineer who left the industry years ago and relocated to Burlington become such a central figure in the evolving saga of Vermont Yankee?

Insider to Whistleblower

Gundersen was a senior vice president for Nuclear Energy Services in Connecticut when he found inapplicable material in 1990 and spoke up about it. He quickly found he had crossed the line from nuclear industry expert to whistleblower, subject of a 1995 New York Times article on whistleblowers, which detailed a long road of contentious discussions.

Maggie Gundersen described her husband as an Eagle Scout and honor student who was hardly a rabble-rouser.

Gundersen said the events in Connecticut changed his view of the nuclear industry.

“Having this experience of blowing the whistle and having the federal government fail makes you think about how the system worked. I thought the NRC was enforcing its laws. I found just the opposite.”

These days, Gundersen finds himself on the other side of the fence, often hired as an expert by anti-nuclear groups like the Vermont Environmental Coalition. He said, however, he is not opposed to nuclear power.

He described his stance on nuclear power this way: The nation should not build any more oil or coal plants. Conservation and efficiency. If more power is needed beyond that, nuclear is a better option to him than