'Radon Kills.’ That was my "Welcome to Hartford" sign all winter long, a huge lemon-yellow banner stretched across a pedestrian overpass that thousands of commuters saw each day. Should the city have allowed it?

Initially, I thought no. Though informative, this deathly fact should not have to compete with the Old State House for the eyes of travelers arriving downtown from the east. Because all other information on the sign was hidden by snow, it read like graffiti.

One day while driving my son to work, I asked him what he thought about the sign. For him, it was a negative, unavoidable intrusion at the start of a potentially productive day. I asked him what he knew about radon. He guessed it was a gas.

Radon is a gas, a heavy one. It's also a proven carcinogen. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, after smoking, it's the second leading cause of lung cancer deaths in the country, causing about 21,000 deaths per year. This, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is higher than the national homicide rate. And according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the radon death rate compares broadly with highway fatalities.

Yet, I'm guessing that when suburban commuters such as my son head into the city, they're far more likely to fear being killed by bad drivers on the road or by murderers on the street. The truth is that home sweet home is statistically as likely to be fatal, especially for those who live on rocky soils, have walk-out basements or take long, hot showers with well water. That's why the surgeon general issued a radon Health Advisory in 2005 and why the Connecticut departments of Public Health and Environmental Protection collaborated on a radon survey.

Like old age, radon is a slow, silent, invisible, ubiquitous, chronic and stealthy killer. It's one of many risk factors associated with lung cancer: a messy, ugly and usually private disease. And unlike fatal car crashes and murders, there's no one to blame, no courtroom drama, no breaking stories and no video.

A second reason the public knows so little about radon is that modern culture has programmed us to think of the natural environment as uniformly beneficial. The truth is that Mother Nature can kill, even in a wealthy, healthy and tectonically stable place like Connecticut, a land of steady habits with respect to natural hazards.

For example, that fresh air you might enjoy when relaxing outdoors contains an average of about 0.4 picocuries per liter of radioactive disintegrations from radon. That's enough to fire approximately one alpha particle of ionizing radiation through your lung tissue every minute you're busy enjoying yourself. There's no known safe lower limit for exposure. Ten times that is cause for concern, and is commonly present in homes.

A third reason people know so little about radon is that they know so little about geology, because it's such a minor part of high school curriculums. Few students learn radon is a short-lived, naturally occurring decay product of uranium, a common trace element in minerals. Few learn that human exposure is controlled by the mineralogy, groundwater hydrology and granular texture of aerated soils.

In an age where government employees are getting serious grief from the public sector, I'm glad that two geologists, Margaret Thomas and Nancy McHone, put together a statewide map to help
residents evaluate their daily exposure (www.courant.com/radon). If you haven't had your home checked yet, do so soon.

I began this complaining about the negativity of the radon banner in Hartford. I ended up reaching the opposite opinion that such signs would only be put up by people eager to inform a vulnerable public. In this case, the American Cancer Society. Its hotline, formerly buried by snow, is 1-800-LUNG USA.