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Nekoma missile site still on the 'radar'

The Cavalier County Job Development Authority still intends to acquire the abandoned Stanley R. Mickelsen Safeguard Complex at Nekoma, N.D., even though negotiations with the federal government have stalled.

By: **Kevin Bonham**, Grand Forks Herald

The Cavalier County Job Development Authority still intends to acquire the abandoned Stanley R. Mickelsen Safeguard Complex at Nekoma, N.D., even though negotiations with the federal government have stalled.

The job development authority has been developing plans for the property since 2006, with hopes to develop the area into a multi-purpose facility featuring:

- An unmanned aircraft system research, development and business park, specializing in non-military applications.
- An education and training center for military, government and civil organizations.
- A historical interpretive center, which would focus on Cold War history and North Dakota's role in the era.

But federal and local agencies have not been able to come to terms on price or on financial responsibility for the required environmental cleanup of the facility.

The federal General Services Administration, which owns the facility, has insisted the buyer pay to clean up an estimated 420,000 gallons of groundwater that has seeped into underground missile silos and become contaminated.

The cleanup cost has been estimated at between \$4 million to \$6 million.

"The main issue is environmental," Carol Goodman, executive director of the Cavalier job development authority, said.

CCJDA received a \$600,000 appropriation from the North Dakota Legislature in 2011. It also has received a \$107,000 federal Economic Development Administration grant, in cooperation with UND's UAS Center for Excellence, for development of the UAS portion of the facility.

It also has received matching funds from the North Dakota Department of Commerce, as well as financial support from banks, utilities and other stakeholders in the region, according to Goodman.

The Safeguard Antiballistic Missile site, authorized by the 1972 agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, once housed 100 ABM missiles, as well as an over-the-horizon radar detection system to track potential nuclear threats.

However, Congress voted to close it in October 1975, one day after it officially was placed in operation. It was shut down by February 1976 and all missiles were removed by 1977.

Environmental issues

In addition to the price stalemate, the North Dakota Department of Health has issued a health violation notice to the U.S. Army/Base Realignment and Closure Committee, stating the facility violates the state's hazardous waste management laws and rules.

The state is giving the federal government until Sept. 28 to respond to the notice, which seeks an explanation of the alleged violations, any corrective actions already taken and what the government will do "to ensure future compliance."

It is not a final notice, according to Scott Radig, director of the department's waste management division, which means it neither imposes nor waives any action available by the state.

"That could come at a later date, depending on the response," he said.

In 2010, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers environmental report to GSA indicated that some of the abandoned Spartan missile silos contain approximately 420,000 gallons of water that "would be regulated as a characteristic hazardous waste due to metal concentrations."

That's an increase from about 110,000 gallons documented in 1995, according to the state health department.

Radig said water taken from samples inside 13 of the 30 silos contains elevated concentrations of chromium and cadmium, likely from paint. He said there is no evidence that the contaminated water has seeped outside the silos.

GSA acknowledged the contamination in its Notice of Surplus Property, when it put the facility up for sale last year. However, the notice included a statement that the purchaser would be responsible for any environmental cleanup.

"It's been apparent that the government is reluctant to take care of the environmental issues, even though it's been documented," Goodman said. "So, there's no way we were going to purchase that without a guarantee that the government would take care of those environmental issues."

What's next

Cavalier job development authority members voted last week not to respond to what they were told is a final contract price from GSA.

The government's asking price, which was undisclosed, is identical to the federal agency's original offer, according to Goodman.

The job development authority had been in negotiations with GSA for the property since February. This past spring, GSA submitted an original draft offer, based on a government-contracted appraisal.

CCJDA made a counter offer in May, Goodman said.

"According to regulations, we were not able to see that appraisal report, so we don't have any idea what of what the price was based on," she said.

Then, last month, GSA sent CCJDA sale-purchase contracts that included the federal agency's original asking price, she said.

Still, CCJDA holds out hope that the issues will be resolved and that the local group will be able to obtain the property.

The next step, Goodman said, is to wait for GSA to put the property up for bids. That could happen this fall.

"We definitely plan to bid on it," she said. "Nobody's ever said this was going to be easy. We look it as just another step in the process and we plan to continue moving forward."

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