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Navy land transfer tied up in massive trail of red tape

Cleanup effort will continue after transfer

By Andrew Bell
Star Column Editor

Each of the hundreds of water wells on the north side of Millington's Navy base requires a county permit first to dig down between 20 and 60 feet, then another permit to maintain its use.

Some more paperwork is needed to close down a well.

The paperwork involved with man-made wells, in this case for discovery, analysis and monitoring of unsafe groundwater, apparently is indicative of the outstanding balance of red tape. The Navy and its lawyers must scrutinize before officially transferring the

parcel of land to the city of Millington.

The 1,901 acres on the north side of Navy Road, including the currently city-leased Millington Airport, was mandated by the U.S. Government in 1993 to be relinquished by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

NSA Mid-South is one of about three bases across the nation undergoing a significant land transfer to its surrounding community.

The city was promised the land in the fall of 1997, then the first quarter of

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1998, and then the third quarter of the same year.

The application to the F.A.A. for the Millington Airport Authority to receive the land was recently approved and the authority said last week that Navy officials plan to have the transfer complete in mid-December.

The Navy's assessors and Southern engineering division, stationed in Charleston, S.C., decided earlier this year to transfer the property to Millington at a price tag of zero dollars; the city, in turn, is ambitious to turn the property adjacent to the airport into a contemporary industrial park, where prospective businesses would have easy access to the airport, the railroad, and eventually the interstate leading to Nashville.

That could very well mean hundreds, perhaps thousands of new jobs for the city.

While no bank checks will be involved in the swap, the effort to get the land's deed, now set for January at the latest, has been taxing in that the city continues to wait, hope and wonder.

Millington Industrial Development Board Executive Director Frank Ryburn splits a lot of his work week between talking to Navy officials and prospective business contacts.

His recruiting sales pitch, however, still remains primarily on the potential.

"We've got some prospects at this point and time, three companies are evidencing interest and we feel like we are in a good position with all three," said Ryburn. "But if they said, 'Yes,' we still don't have the deed."

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TAPE (continued)

Ryburn said the problem is that the Navy has transposed its meticulous evaluations into the detailed language of the transfer, creating encyclopedia size data to be reviewed by the lawyers of both entities.

Ryburn would prefer any environmental information concerning the land, including land restrictions, typed out on one page.

Whatever final restrictions the Navy places on the land, the limits probably will be most to industrial park officials, who only envision placing buildings and roadways to and from the airport, not subdivisions.

Commander John Baker of NASAMid-South said the Navy's commitment to ensuring that any property it formerly used is sufficiently cleaned to meet environmental standards — ones that constantly keep changing — will continue for three or four years after the Navy has relinquished proprietorship.

He points out, however, that delays in the transfer at this point have little to do with ongoing environmental studies. Rather, he said, it's simply the time consuming task of taking the base transfer documents from one military chain of command to another.

The hierarchy includes the EPA, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, among others.

In fact, according to Baker, despite the environmental task team's recent additional finding of contaminated soil around the decades old water tower, the secretary of the Navy signed off on a

convenient deferral request early last month, signifying that the land can be transferred even while efforts to clean up contaminated water areas continue.

"Getting the CDR approved is good news," said Baker. "Before, the clean-up had to be completely finished before the transfer could be approved. But handing over the property doesn't allow us (Navy) to just walk away from it if we contaminated it. We have to upgrade to the standards set."

Tanya Barker, NSA Mid-South's Environmental Division Director, said there are four areas on the north side of the base crews are still investigating and monitoring, including the former turkey shoot area and another area where the Navy practiced fire fighting drills, including disposing of crude oil fires.

She said the Navy has spent \$13 million in clean up projects just on the north side of the base, including removal of storage tanks.

Baker said soil experts are monitoring the direction of contaminated waste water — what's termed "Hot Spots" — and something that's unrelated to suitable drinking water, normally found 500 ft. to 1,500 ft. below the ground.

They are also trying to determine the most cost-effective manner in which to clean it up.

"The base today, or years from now is a reflection of the Navy," said Baker. "We want to make sure we're doing the right thing, we're in a partnership with the city, and this can be a win-win situation."

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