

LOCAL NEWS

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NSY LONG BEACH
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Navy hints L.B. yard will be kept open

By James R. Carroll

From Our National Bureau

WASHINGTON — Officials at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard and the four other remaining yards have been told by the Navy that it believes there is enough repair and overhaul work on the fleet to keep all five facilities open and busy for the foreseeable future.

However, the Navy was careful to avoid promising that none of the five shipyards will be on the Navy's list of base closings next year.

Rear Adm. John Claman, deputy director of the Navy division in charge of the shipyards, told a closed meeting of shipyard officials and union members here this week that the Navy is still working on its base closure list.

Claman was unavailable for further comment.

Ultimately, said Bruce Christensen, president of the National

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Association of Naval Shipyards, the decision whether to keep or close a shipyard "will be driven by the dollar, by the budget."

A skeptical J.B. Larkins, president of the Long Beach Naval Shipyard Employees Association, said he heard similar assurances from Claman when there were eight naval shipyards.

He said he did not question Claman's sincerity, but "I feel very strongly that Long Beach will be on the list" in 1995.

The Long Beach yard narrowly escaped shutdown during the 1993 round of base closings. At that time, the Navy did not put the yard on its closing list, but the independent Base Closure and Realignment Commission did. After deciding on a close vote to keep Long Beach open, commission members warned that the yard could face worse trouble the next time around.

Long Beach officials and shipyard employees have been working to try to head off that trouble, making several early trips to Washington to plead their case to the Navy and to the base closing commission staff, as well as to plot strategy.

On Wednesday, Larkins and the employee association's vice

president, Terry Holm, said they had talked to the Navy and to members of Congress about the absence of work in Long Beach, where 870 more workers are scheduled to be let go by Aug. 3.

That would cut the work force to about 2,500 permanent employees at a facility that had 8,000 workers only a few years ago.

Larkins and Holm said the Navy has been giving work to the private shipyards in San Diego, and in at least one case, a San Diego yard has farmed out work to a shipyard in Mexico.

The two said there was some good news for Long Beach: The Navy last month ended its policy of pitting the public shipyards against the private yards for ship repair work.

The Navy said it was nearly impossible to compare true costs between public and private yards, so seeking competitive bids was essentially pointless. The service now can use its own discretion in assigning work.

"So we'll see if the Navy is serious about saving Long Beach real soon" by sending the yard some more work, Larkins said.

He said the Navy also is discussing changes to the so-called "home port rule," which required

short-term repairs on ships to be performed within 75 miles of those ships' home ports. That rule has blocked some work on San Diego-based vessels from going to Long Beach.

Under changes the Navy is now considering, the service

would designate "regional repair clusters," one of which would encompass all of Southern California and make Long Beach eligible to work on any ships in San Diego, where a large part of the Pacific Fleet is based.