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## What next for Cold War complex? County officials hope for a development role after Nekoma site sold

Economic leaders in Cavalier County are clinging to the hope of developing at least part of the mothballed Pyramid on the Prairie, even after falling short in their bid to buy the former anti-ballistic missile facility in Nekoma, N.D.

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

Economic leaders in Cavalier County are clinging to the hope of developing at least part of the mothballed Pyramid on the Prairie, even after falling short in their bid to buy the former anti-ballistic missile facility in Nekoma, N.D.

"We are waiting to find out who the successful bidder is," said Carol Goodman, executive director of the Cavalier County Job Development Authority.

The Stanley R. Mickelsen Safeguard Complex, which once housed the nation's only anti-ballistic missile facility, was sold to last week for \$530,000. CCJDA dropped out of the bidding at about \$500,000, the second-highest offer, after board members decided the price likely would rise significantly higher.

"We not only needed to obtain that property in a responsible manner, but also for transition funds, and for redevelopment funds," she said. "The question was how do we afford to own it, especially when it's going for that price."

CCJDA's final bid is held in reserve, until the federal General Services Administration determines that the high bidder will follow through on the purchase, according to Goodman.

The name of the buyer does not become public information until the new owner records the deed, according to a spokeswoman for the GSA, which is handling the sale.

The CCJDA has been developing plans for the property since 2004, with the goal of developing 431-acre property into a research/business development park for unmanned aerial systems, featuring:

- n An unmanned aircraft system research, development and business park, specializing in nonmilitary applications.

- n An education and training center for military, government and civil organizations.

- n An online, or cloud data storage area, which would be located in the missile site control building — the one commonly referred to as the "pyramid on the prairie."

"It would be good for the community, would create lot of high-paying jobs, and it's an ideal use for that kind of a building," Goodman said.

- n A historical interpretive center, which would focus on Cold War history and North Dakota's role in the era.

### Historical mandate

"There is a historical preservation mandate from the federal government," Goodman said. "That's about one-third of the property. That's the tactical area, the area that cannot ever be changed. The exterior of the buildings can't be changed; can't be moved. Nothing new can be built there."

The successful buyer will have to follow that mandate, she said, and the local group is willing to assist or assume that role.

The Safeguard ABM site, authorized by a 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 cut off funding for the facility 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.

"The reason we had such a priority to the historical aspect is that it's part of our history," she said. "It's the only one that was ever built. It played a significant role in the ending of the Cold War. It always has been part of our plan."

There's been plenty of speculation in recent days about the identity of the high bidder. Suggestions range from major defense industry or UAS companies, oil industry firms working in North Dakota's Oil Patch, to area landowners.

The property, located just north of the tiny community of Nekoma, is surrounded by farmland and wind energy towers. The \$530,000 price tag amounts to about \$1,229 per acre, which is considered a bargain for agricultural land in the region.

### \$400,000 with strings

CCJDA received a \$600,000 appropriation from the North Dakota Legislature in 2011. It also 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 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.

Before the auction ever took place, GSA and CCJDA attempted to reach an agreement on a direct sale of the property, for a price of \$400,000. The price, at the time, included the Nekoma facility, as well as four remote nuclear launch sites in the surrounding area.

However, locals balked at GSA's insistence that the buyer pay the estimated \$4 million to \$6 million to remove approximately 420,000 gallons of water that had seeped into underground storage tanks at the facility and had become contaminated.

Then, just days before the projected direct sale, the North Dakota Department of Health issued a notice of violation to the U.S. Army and Base Realignment and Closure Division asking the federal agency for a plan for cleanup.

CCJDA decided not to buy the property without assurances that local taxpayers would not be stuck with the hefty clean-up bill.

"It would have been irresponsible for us to go ahead and purchase the property without having significant reassurance that Cavalier County would not be responsible for the environmental cleanup," Goodman said.

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