

# Missile site may come back to life

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## Long-dormant N.D. complex may open again

By Tom Pantera  
STAFF WRITER

NEKOMA, N.D. — Like an ancient tomb, a 12-story pyramid looms over the farm fields just north of tiny Nekoma. Concrete ventilation shafts stand nearby, faceless markers of a brief cold-war boom.

Closer to the highway, duplexes remain empty as they have for the 15 years since they were built. Weeds sprout on untraveled streets. Rusty basketball backboards stand by an empty office building.

Those buildings and others, plus 46 empty missile silos, are what remain of the 433-acre Stanley R. Mi-

ckelson Safeguard Complex. The complex was built in the mid-1970s as an antiballistic missile site. It controlled the missiles on the site itself, plus 54 others located in four sites 10 to 20 miles away.

But it was operational less than a year before the U.S. Congress voted to close it. Ever since, it has stood empty, surrounded by a fence with rusting signs warning off trespassers and identifying it as a U.S. Army military reservation.

Now, the site may once again come to life. There is talk of reactivating it in Congress, where the

Senate Armed Services Committee has called for deployment of a ground-based antiballistic missile system.

The reopening is not at all certain. U.S. Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., has said the Senate appears firmly behind it. U.S. Rep. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., has said the reopening is doubtful. Conrad said the Bush Administration initially opposed it, but appears to be warming to the idea.

Meanwhile, while discussions of that issue continue the site is seeing its first activity in 15 years, work an official of the Army Strategic Defense Command says is unrelated.

Bill Congo, chief of external affairs for the Strategic Defense Command, said several million gallons of water are being pumped out of the pyramid, formerly a radar site, and the adjoining power plant, which is underground and marked by the ventilation towers.

The pumping, Congo said, is "nothing more than environmental

work that has been planned and programmed for quite some time."

Construction of the site began in 1970. It went into limited operation in March 1975. The site ceased operation at 7:58 p.m. on Feb. 10, 1976.

Congo said that in the ensuing 15 years, water has seeped in from the ground. He compared it to a home in which the sump pump has been left unused, allowing the basement to fill with water. The water was discovered during a routine maintenance check of the facility.

A \$500,000 contract was awarded in April to a Missouri firm to pump out the buildings. The work was further complicated in June, when an environmental scientist with the North Dakota Health Department found two leaking electrical transformers at the site, spurring fears of contamination by PCBs, toxic chemicals used as a

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fire retardant in electrical equipment.

Congo said no traces of PCBs have been found in the 11-million-gallons of water pumped out of the buildings so far.

But nearby residents fear the work has caused other problems. Nekoma Mayor Tony Liebersbach said recent tests showed an unacceptable level of bacteria in his city's water, forcing Nekoma to begin pumping in water from nearby Langdon.

He said he has no proof the problem was caused by the work at the base, but "they seem to be running a big secret out there."

Congo says it is doubtful the contamination is because of work at the missile site. "I'm not an engineer, but it kind of seems impossible," he said. "All the water that we're pumping out of that facility, we are testing according to state standards as well as federal standards. At this stage, we haven't found any contamination whatsoever. ... I have no way of telling you hard and fast that that is impossible, but it's certainly unlikely."

The water is being pumped into three rubber-lined lagoons, he said.

During the original construction, workers built 10 wells and installed 58 miles of water line capable of carrying 1,000 gallons a minute. Construction took 170,230 cubic yards of concrete, 44 million pounds of reinforcing bar, 2,273 miles of wire and 750 miles of conduit. The site contains 40 miles of piping and 685 tons of duct material.

Some nearby residents say they believe the base was fully operational only three days, but Congo said that depends on how the term is defined. "I have been told it was months it was in operation, not days."

Besides the empty pyramid and the power plant, offices, recreational buildings and even a church stand empty, waiting for a new life which may or may not come.

Even some of the original base housing remains. Congo said 20 to 30 family houses, all two- and three-bedroom duplexes, are still on the site. "At one time, they thought the Air Force might have been interested in taking them, but that didn't happen," he said.

Some of the homes are in better shape than others. Structural engineers will have to determine which ones still are useable if the site reopens.

Of course, if the people come back the missiles will return as well. Congo said 100 Spartan and Sprint missiles were put in, but were taken out starting in 1976. Those nuclear-tipped missiles would have been launched and detonated high above the planet, knocking out Soviet missiles coming over the pole.

In contrast, any new missiles which would go in would be launched at and actually hit the Soviet missiles, presumably knocking them out before they even got a chance to arm their nuclear war heads.

Even if the new missiles come in, there will be one old one left to remind residents of the site's first life.

The Spartan missile, painted white but dotted with rust, towers 55 feet above the city park in Langdon. A plaque notes that it was presented to the city on Aug. 21, 1975, during the initial deployment at Nekoma.

# Residents hopeful, but skeptical

By Tom Pantera

STAFF WRITER

LANGDON, N.D. — Wanda Moos remembers fondly what it was like to work at the Stanley R. Mickelson Safeguard Complex 12 miles south of Langdon.

"At the time, it was the best-paying job around," says Moos, who ran the supply room at the antiballistic missile base's power plant. Pay ranged from minimum wage "right on up the scale" and the benefits were excellent. Probably half the workers were local, she says.

The possibility of those jobs coming back — and of the accompanying economic benefits — has some residents cautiously optimistic about a possible reopening of the missile base.

But others are more reserved. They have heard rumors of reactivation before.

The antiballistic missile base was built in the 1970s and was in operation less than a year before it was closed by Congress. At its height, it employed perhaps a couple of thousand people and made miniature boom towns of Langdon, tiny Nekoma, N.D., located just next door to the base, and other Cavalier County towns.

Bill Verwey was mayor of Nekoma from 1966 to 1986. The town, which now has 60 residents, mushroomed to more than 400 when the base was operating.

Verwey now runs the town's lone bar, which along with a hair-dressing salon and a city-owned cafe make up Nekoma's entire business district.

While the base was operating, Nekoma also supported a second bar, a store and gas station. "From about 3 o'clock until 11 o'clock the street was lined up on both sides with cars and cars in the middle besides," he says. "You just couldn't walk in (Verwey's bar). It was just plumb full all the time."

His patrons were "a hell of a good bunch of people." The city's police chief, fearing the influx, quit just before the base opened, leaving Verwey's wife as the police chief. But the workers never caused a law enforcement problem, he says.

"I think 90 percent would like to see it open," Verwey says. The minority consists of people who fear a new ABM site would spur another arms race, plus "a few that don't want that much traffic."

But the enthusiasm is tempered by a skepticism.

Tony Liebersbach, who replaced

Verwey as mayor, says most Nekoma residents "have nothing against it. We lived through it before and didn't have any problems."

But "I don't think there's too many people believe it's going to happen," he adds.

Even if the base reopens, for Nekoma it will mean "actually, not too much," Liebersbach says. "There'd be a little boom. Otherwise, the town didn't change any the last time, I don't know why it should change this time."

Personally, he says, "I ain't excited about it. When you're my age (73), it isn't gonna make too much difference. As long as they're gonna spend the money, I'd like to see them spend the money so the young people around here can get jobs..."

"Most people think, 'well, we'll wait and see.' (Rep. Byron) Dorgan says it isn't going. (Sen. Quentin) Burdick and the other guy seem to think it is," he says.

Some local enthusiasm may be tempered because "some people got cheated," says Liebersbach. "The people that they took their land, I understand they paid them from \$125 to \$200 an acre for it. In two years, that land would've been selling for \$600 an acre. It wasn't fair."

Even in Langdon, some who made investments when the base opened saw their planned profits evaporate when the base closed.

Several mobile home parks opened, but when the base closed just one could have met the demand, says Langdon Mayor Ken Wilhelm. Apartment houses were built, but some never saw full occupancy.

Moos, who runs Langdon's chamber of commerce, says when the base opened the first time "the town pretty much got overrun." Housing, streets, roads and schools proved inadequate. Langdon built two schools in the early 1970s.

But the base's presence provided Langdon and other cities with an opportunity to beef up their infrastructures.

Harold Blanchard, Langdon's mayor during the missile site's operation, says the city was able to upgrade its water system, improve streets and secure more hospital and school facilities. Wilhelm says the reopening is "probably the most talked-about thing at the moment" in Langdon because it holds the promise of making the area "the boomingest thing north of Grand Forks," Wilhelm says.