

NEKOMA, ND - North Dakota's economic development director says the anti-ballistic missile site at Nekoma would be the state's biggest-ever economic development project.

But others are skeptical that the site will ever be reactivated.

Mick Bohn, director of the state Department of Economic Development and Finance, said more than 400 North Dakota businesses are gearing up to do subcontract work at Nekoma in computer programming, security, fire protection, weapons system manufacturing and general construction.

Bohn said the project would also have a long-lasting impact.

"It's a technology-oriented program and it'll raise the technological competence of North Dakota companies involved in it," he said.

CONGRESSMEN DOUBTFUL

North Dakota's two Democratic congressmen - Sen. Kent Conrad and Rep. Byron Dorgan - doubt that the site, which was operational for a few months in the mid-1970's, will ever be reactivated.

Conrad cites escalating costs as one bad sign.

"A year ago they were \$8 billion or \$10 billion and have jumped to \$15 billion to \$25 billion," he said.

Another bad sign was a move by House and Senate negotiators to postpone deployment of a missile defense system from 1996 to 2006. Conrad said that delay will allow proponents of multiple ABM sites to push for changes in the treaty between the United States and the former Soviet Union that limits each side to one ABM site - at Nekoma, in northeastern North Dakota, and at Moscow.

Dorgan said political support probably favors a six-base system built in coastal areas of the United States.

BOHN CITES SOURCES

Bohn said his sources in Washington tell him that Russian President Boris Yeltsin has refused to renegotiate the ABM treaty.

No one in the Nekoma area is sure what will happen, either.

"It all depends on who you talk to," said Nekoma Mayor Tony Liebersbach.

"I go by Nekoma every week," said Langdon Mayor Ken Wilhelmi. "There's work going on out there. It's not like the government to clean something up and not go ahead with something."