

Few people are left to recall the boom days of Nekoma

By Marilyn Wheeler

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NEKOMA, N.D. — Twenty years ago, they had a front-row seat in the Cold War. On Wednesday, folks here got word that the show likely was over for good.

The Pentagon announced a strategy to develop new technology rather than re-deploy the anti-ballistic missile system in their backyard.

Abandoned days after it was activated in 1975, a \$6 billion concrete pyramid that once contained the radar stands empty on a grassy knoll north of town.

Bill Verwey's Nekoma bar is the only place open downtown on a summer afternoon. He sits alone in the darkness, watching baseball on television.

Verwey was mayor in the early 1970s when the ABM site was under construction.

"Nekoma was a different town then," he recalled Wednesday. "At four o'clock, you couldn't move in here. The streets were just lined with cars."

There was work for everyone, some 5,000 jobs. But they all rolled out of town — the people and their mobile homes.

The U.S. House voted to close the Nekoma site just one day after it officially opened on Oct. 1, 1975.

Over the past couple of years, Congress has talked about converting it to a ground-based missile defense system. The Pentagon plan announced

Wednesday would make it a research project.

Sixty people are left in Nekoma, many of them farmers who live out of town.

The boarded up Nekoma State Bank looks like it hasn't seen a depositor since World War II. Across the street, Pat Wheeler is wrapping pieces of chocolate pie left from lunch at the Nekoma cafe and community center.

It's a real shame about the missile site, she said. She came to Nekoma about a year ago, when her husband Larry was hired to supervise cleanup at the site.

Earlier, Larry Wheeler said he doesn't listen to talk of closing it.

"I don't think it's worth listening to," he said. "I don't think it's over yet."

"I don't believe they'd come to the point of fixing it up like they have in the past couple of years, then shut it down completely," he said. "All the buildings were painted, streets fixed, new windows and roofs ... It looks pretty nice, all mowed and everything."

The barracks' chapel and a school are wearing a fresh coat of khaki paint. But it's so quiet you can hear the crickets and the sound of a lawn mower on the far side of the high security complex.

In spite of all the political promises to reactivate the missile site, Verwey said he has little hope the jobs will return.