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100 acres to go back to Letterkenny Army Depot

By JIM HOOK Senior writer

Community leaders agreed Monday to return 100 acres to Letterkenny Army Depot more than a decade after the base closure commission had called for the Army to give the land to the community.

The proposed transfer would be another in a long line of time-consuming property deals between Letterkenny and the community during the past 12 years.

A group dedicated to strengthening Letterkenny asked the owner of the Cumberland Valley Business Park to transfer the land to Letterkenny to improve the depot's military value. The request came less than two days after Defense Secretary Robert Gates called for "closer, harsher scrutiny" of Pentagon spending.

"What he said was coded talk to plan for another BRAC (base realignment and closure commission)," said Dr. John Gray, retired top-ranking civilian at Letterkenny.

BRAC planners look at "military value" and other issues when judging installations.

BRAC has been a roller coaster ride for Letterkenny since the first one in 1989.

Letterkenny gained missions in BRAC 2005, a reversal from BRAC 1995 when about 1,350 acres were ordered returned to the community and hundreds of jobs were lost. More than 450 acres from BRAC 1995 remain to be transferred from the Army to the community, 12 years after the plan was adopted.

Meanwhile, Letterkenny has rebounded and is again Franklin County's largest employer. Letterkenny has diversified its workload. BRAC 2005 transferred jobs to Letterkenny from Red River Army Depot in Texas, but Red River also survived as one of the Army's five maintenance depots. Military planners have said the Army needs just four. Letterkenny and Red River currently are the Army's leading recipients of Shingo medallions honoring efficiency in manufacturing.

The Letterkenny Industrial Development Authority is creating a business park on former Letterkenny land. Many of the new jobs in the business park are directly related to work at Letterkenny.

"The reality of the situation is: We have the largest economic driver in the community next door to us," LIDA Executive Director John Van Horn said.

Van Horn cautioned the board, however, about trying to return the 100 acres on South Patrol Road to the Army.

"It's a very long process," Van Horn said. "The truth is it takes two years. This may take longer. It's not easy to give land back to the Army. The Army is not

excited about receiving property when it's be exsessed."

He speaks from experience. LIDA succeeded in giving back 234 acres to the Army in 2006 at the request of the Letterkenny commander with support from a master plan, a congressman and the community. Letterkenny needed the additional land for "force protection."

Letterkenny plans to move its headquarters and other elements behind the fence. So far, a \$4.8 million child care center is under construction and is to open this fall.

The latest proposed land transfer is complicated:

n Team Letterkenny, a Letterkenny booster in the community, proposed the transfer with support of Letterkenny and letters from U.S. Sens. Robert Casey and Arlen Specter and U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster.

n Details about dedicating roads and setting aside buffers must be worked out.

n The wastewater treatment plant serving Letterkenny and the business park is in the middle of the parcel. The plant owned by LIDA must be expanded and improved in the near future, and possibly again, although it would be difficult to make the plant a regional one, Van Horn said.



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n The Army does not like to get back land for recreational use, according to Van Horn.

The 100 acres includes ball fields, a walking trail and a former recreational vehicle park. It also includes a paint training shop, three houses and plans for more housing.

A proposed barracks would replace another that can no longer be used because it is within the blast zone of a recently constructed missile shop, according to Gray.

"We don't know if those houses are going to be built, or if those barracks are going to be built," Van Horn said.

Letterkenny had encouraged Army units to train weekends on the depot. They bunked in a former ammunition surveillance facility.

The BRAC process further complicates the deal. BRAC in 1998 ordered the Army to unload the land.

LIDA, and Chambersburg Area School District in turn, was to receive the land. The school district planned to use it for an environmental/agricultural education center. Environmental cleanup delayed the transfer, which has yet to take place.

The school board has no plans for the land and in March agreed to give back the land that it was going to get. Van Horn followed up with a letter indicating that LIDA would likely support the Army holding onto the land.

The LIDA board by unanimous voice voted on Monday to embrace the concept of giving the land back to the Army.

The board's action "shows our strong community support for our depot," Team Letterkenny member Jerry Warnement said. "It continues to enhance the military value of our depot. There are details to work out, but we are on the right road."

Van Horn urged LIDA to consider getting assurances from the Army about speeding the transfer of land through BRAC.

"Why don't we get the land we were promised?" he said.

The latest land transfer from Letterkenny to LIDA was in 2004. Another 60 acres has been ready since 2007, but lawyers needed time to approve the language that allows construction without restrictions, according to BRAC environmental coordinator Bryan Hoke. Prior deeds had limited the depth of excavations because of the potential for health hazards from soil contamination.

Land that is to be transferred in the future is dealing with vapor intrusion and other environmental issues, according to Hoke.

"We are getting close, versus being farther away," Hoke said.

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