

Hanford's future will be set minus DOE, say city, county

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PROSSER — The federal government has been shut out of an agreement to plan the future of Hanford lands.

In a sudden reversal of policy, Benton County Commissioners joined Richland officials Monday in rescinding an invitation for the Department of Energy to become a partner in land-use planning for post-cleanup Hanford.

"This commission is not going to let them sign on," said Benton County Commissioner Max Benitz.

Joe King, Richland city manager, said, "The wedding is off."

Three months ago, Benton, Richland and DOE officials tentatively agreed to draft a regional plan for future land uses at the nuclear reservation.

But a March 17 deadline for signing the agreement in principle passed without DOE's stamp of approval.

At the time, Hanford Manager John Wagoner told county officials his agency was waiting for information from regional Indian tribes before signing on. He urged city and county officials to continue work on the plan, with the understanding DOE shortly would join in the effort.

But Monday, Benton County commissioners cited state law and declared themselves the only agency with authority to draft a comprehensive land-use plan for Hanford's currently off-limits real estate.

The county plan would adhere to the same process followed in complying with the state Growth Management Act, including use of public hearings.

Richland's authority extends to areas in the city's 20-year urban growth boundaries, which include parts of Hanford's 300 Area, officials said.

"With respect to comprehensive land-use plans, the recognized planning agency nationally is the county," said Commission Chairman Ray Isaacson. "We wanted DOE to be part of the process, but it's not essential (under law)."

A DOE spokesman Monday night said the decision to oust the federal government from the planning effort was "somewhat surprising."

"They certainly have the authority to plan for the county," said Maynard Plahuta, government liaison program manager.

"The only thing we were hoping is we could work cooperatively with them so at the time when we transition from DOE to the private sector there would be a seamless plan, that it would move over and there would not be any difference from their plan and DOE's plan," he said.

Ensuring DOE plans follow county and city plans won't be easy, KING acknowledged.

"It puts us in a less desirable position because if DOE were a partner in developing the plan we would have better assurance that they would be bound by the plan," King said. "We're going to have to use other means to get their input and buy in (on the plan)."

At a previous meeting, Benton County planners echoed that sentiment, arguing only a cooperative planning approach would ensure conflicting land-use maps wouldn't be drawn up by different jurisdictions, thereby threatening the city's

or county's intended development of the site.

"We don't want to say one area should be industrial and then have it planned (by DOE) for something different so before they release it the land isn't cleaned properly," Benton Planning Director Terry Marden told commissioners in March.

Commissioners stressed their plan applies to land uses, not land ownership.

The county has penned several letters to federal and state officials urging endorsement of their land-use plan and asking the county be made custodian of surplus lands until the plan is complete.

One of those sites might be the Arid Land Ecology Reserve, which will be the topic of a Wednesday public meeting in Richland. Also soon-to-be-released is the Hanford Reach, which the National Park Service has recommended as a wildlife refuge.

Meanwhile, county and city planners are compiling an inventory of Hanford's existing infrastructure. It's the first stage of what's envisioned to be a three-year process.

When complete, officials hope to have identified which areas are best suited for industrial, recreational or open-space development.

Richland City Councilman Darryl Howard termed it a worthy process, with or without the federal government on board.

"If DOE is not going to be a party, I want to see the council of the city of Richland and the Port of Benton and the county all working together for an ultimate development that is to bring together business and economic development at the site," Howard said.