

Hearing set for February on Caddo industrial park plans

|By SANDRA CASON, News Messenger|

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Industrial versus ecological use of property near Caddo Lake drew a standing room only crowd to Tuesday's commission meeting.

While county judge candidates Richard Anderson and Jeffrey Thompson spoke in favor of turning over all property to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior, the court voted unanimously to act only after a public hearing.

That session will be scheduled no later than the last Tuesday in February, Judge Wayne McWhorter said.

Controversy arose when McWhorter, Sam Moseley and Tommy Whaley asked U. S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) to give the county 1,500 to 2,000 acres for industrial development.

The land was to be withheld from a wildlife refuge created in 2004 and now under development.

McWhorter said last week the project was a no-go because Sen. Hutchison had not lent her support to the original number of acres requested.

"During the last three or four days, through articles in the Marshall News Messenger – in which the senator and I have exchanged conversation – it now appears she is willing to support 1,000 to 1,500 acres. Before we take any action, I would like to hold a public hearing," McWhorter said.

Precinct 1 Commissioner Jerry Lomax seconded McWhorter's motion. "I am the one who had the matter put on the agenda," he said. "You have proposed exactly what I wanted to do – get it out there and let the people decide."

However, Precinct 4 Commissioner Thompson called for an immediate vote, saying he no longer favors industrial development.

Precinct 2 Commissioner Emma Bennett agreed. "I was out there for the first dedication and, after hearing what had to be done to clean it up, I think we should go with a refuge and I think all these people here agree with me."

A call by Ms. Bennett to "stand or hold up your hand," confirmed she had guessed correctly.

McWhorter said he disagreed with opinions that "it's not a good location for industry. I am strongly in favor of being ecologically responsible," he said.

"I grew up in West Texas. Everywhere else is paradise compared to that. Most of you in this room don't know that, when I have a chance, I'm out sitting in the woods.

"I have degrees in biology and chemistry and business (courses) galore on top of that. You don't spend four years in college and not get an idea" of environmental issues.

But, "I ran for county judge on a platform of jobs, jobs, jobs," he added. "That area has our highest level of unemployment. They need and they want jobs. This is a marketing advantage to me that we have a thousand-acre site just sitting there."

Opponents have given the idea that industry would be located "on the Caddo Lake shoreline," which is not the case, McWhorter said. "It's eight miles (away) as the crow flies."

Christina Anderson was one of three who spoke. "As a community volunteer, I have worked to bring about economic growth through tourism. I am in opposition to any industry that would harm Caddo Lake."

Her husband Richard Anderson said the Department of the Interior has "first claim" to any land in the possession of the U. S. Department of Defense, as is the case with the property.

Noting it will inevitably belong to the governmental entity responsible for the refuge, Anderson added: "This issue is, do we do it now or do we do it later."

He urged the court either to schedule a public hearing within 30 days or "have Senator Hutchison release the hold."

Robert Cargill of Longview also supported a release. "The U. S. Army has spent \$160 million to deal with pollution (there) and they are far from finished," he said.

"Any industrial site is going to have to await (the expenditure of) another \$160 million."

After public comments, Thompson produced two letters to Sen. Hutchison. The first, dated Aug. 29, 2005, expressed his support "for this re-direction of the land ... (which) has the potential to possibly create thousands of jobs for our region.

"I can vaguely remember many years ago when Morton Thiokol ... was in operation. Thousands of workers helped support our local economy during those years.

"When the ammunition plant closed, many ... had to leave." Thompson said he liked to think a couple of the jobs to be created would allow his teenage sons to find "economic success and happiness" here instead of having to seek it elsewhere.

In a second letter, faxed to Sen. Hutchison's office Tuesday morning, Thompson said he originally "was not well informed.

"Since that initial letter, I have made several trips to the proposed industrial development site. I was stunned that almost the entire infrastructure, which included the railroad spurs, buildings, water lines, sewage treatment facilities, and electrical grid works had been removed from the original plant site."

Thompson said Mark Williams, Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge manager "reviewed with me U. S. Fish and Wildlife plans and procedures to maximize ... use of the land, as well as the ... dollars that could be recovered" through tourism.

The letter asked Sen. Hutchison to "transfer the remaining land as soon as possible." His request met with applause. "For 65 years, Harrison County has not had a say on that property. The longer we wait, the worse it will be. Today is the decision" day, he added.

Precinct 3 Commissioner James Greer said he favors industrial development but is willing to let the public decide.

"This court has been pushing for jobs. If you've got a Korean auto factory coming to the South, they're going to be looking for something like that.

"I think we should go on with a public hearing. If we get nothing (favorable) out of that, then it's a dead issue."

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