

Industrial park – dead in the water

|By SANDRA CASON, News Messenger|

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An industrial park near Caddo Lake is dead in the water following Tuesday's split vote by Harrison County commissioners.

The court voted 3-2 for "the immediate transfer of the remaining property at the former Longhorn" Army Ammunition Plant for the "sole intention of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge and its use and enjoyment by the public."

The motion was read into the record by Precinct 4 Commissioner Jeffrey Thompson. Precinct 1 Commissioner Jerry Lomax seconded, with Precinct 2 Commissioner Emma Bennett voting in favor.

Dissenters Judge Wayne McWhorter and Precinct 3 Commissioner James Greer said the court was making a mistake. "I, personally, think it is one of the biggest errors the county has ever made," Greer said.

When the judge noted the move would be regretted for the next 25 years, Greer added: "more like 50 or 100."

Commissioners nixing the plan said they were voting their constituents' sentiment, a position Thompson alluded to in his motion.

"After the public hearing last night where over 85 percent of the public in attendance voiced their opposition, I move that the commissioners court request the Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison and the Honorable Louis Gohmert to remove the temporary hold" and transfer the property to the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Department, he said.

During Monday's hearing, 123 people signed their names and addresses, with 15 noting they favored the Karnack Business Park. That translates to 88 percent favoring use of the entire tract as a wildlife refuge.

Local businessmen had asked U. S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) and U. S. Congressman Gohmert (R-Tyler) to set aside 2,000 acres of an 8,500-acre tract for industrial development.

Three people spoke during Tuesday's meeting. Paul Fortune asked commissioners to place the issue of timber sales in the Caddo Lake area on the agenda for their next meeting "to see if we can get some of this money – or perhaps all of it" – for Karnack Independent School District.

Charles Heimerding said he favored industrial development and Jack Canson said all the property should be used as a wildlife refuge.

McWhorter reiterated his belief that no tourists would be lost to the wildlife refuge, if the southwest corner were given for industrial development. He also said "good transportation is quite accessible to this property" and "with the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, only environmentally sound businesses could be located" there.

Thompson's motion and Lomax's second remained of the floor for about 20 minutes while McWhorter exited the courtroom into commissioners' offices, re-entered via the public doors and delivered a six-page speech from the podium.

Not included in the written address was information on a survey McWhorter paid to conduct. "I was criticized considerably by a lot of people for that," he said, adding he did not "put much stock" in the results.

Of the ballots sent to each Harrison County household in which a registered voter resides, 1,200 were returned, the judge said, with 599 respondents saying they were against the industrial park and 563 favoring it.

"It was basically a tie," McWhorter said. "I had trouble with the printer. He failed me and didn't get them to the post office on time. Then I paid for a recorded voice message to be sent to all 33,000 households. Not one phone call was ever delivered."

McWhorter said he "invited the opposition to participate in counting" the ballots. "I was not even respected with a return phone call," he said. "I waited until 2 p.m. yesterday and when I called him, he apologized, saying 'my group decided they didn't want to do that.'

"There were some good, honorable people who counted them," however, he said. "I also offered to pay to conduct another survey," but it was deemed "inappropriate. Can you tell me you didn't care what the people thought? You can say it, but it isn't so," he told commissioners.

McWhorter said the court had ignored those "who are really desperate for a job. We heard from a lot of people last night, almost all of whom live on or near (Caddo) Lake," he said. "I did not hear a single person opposing the Karnack Business Park who was looking for a job.

"Probably 70 percent of the people speaking against ... were retired folks. They moved here with their money. They did not make their money here because they could not. Some even admitted that.

"But I did hear a strong appeal from the black community who said they want jobs and they want the Karnack Business Park. We heard ... from KISD school board president (Jody Yancy) about how important new jobs would be."

McWhorter also reminded commissioners six of Karnack Independent School District's seven board members sent letters of support for an industrial park to McWhorter and to Senator Hutchison.

Noting these are the only elected officials in the northeastern part of the county, the judge added: "Their vote should carry a lot of weight. How can you not consider the immediate need of the black community in Karnack? We cannot just ignore the need of our constituents. We must do all we can to help them have a job. We have that opportunity now."

"I implore you to think about the black community that needs jobs now, and to think about the great brain drain of our young people who must leave here to find good jobs."

"I can sleep good laying my head down tonight knowing that I did all I could do to get jobs into this county."

Ms. Bennett indicated, she too, would sleep well. "After listening to what you had to say in the last commissioners court meeting, last night and the phone calls I've gotten – which kept me awake at night – I have to vote for" the motion.

"You voted for me to represent your best interests," she told the standing-room-only crowd, "and 80 percent of those who supported me were asking me not to put an industrial park in that area. I'll have to go with my constituents."

And, she asked McWhorter why he had not shared his feelings with the court earlier.

"I've been saying it for weeks in bits and pieces," he replied.

Lomax said he, too, was voting the wishes of his constituents. "I echo your thoughts," he told Ms. Bennett. "You (the voters) are the folks who are telling us what to do."

"I can't support this," Greer said of the motion. "There was talk last night about this being crammed down your throats. I don't agree with that. I think the group made some errors by not coming to you folks and discussing it."

"I don't know if it would have helped. I do know that 900 acres on Page Road recently sold for \$3,400 per acre. I haven't done the math, but that's a lot of money. Here are 2,000 acres (available) at no cost to anyone. We are telling the world we are against industry."

"The median income" of Harrison County "is going to stay at 17.5 percent" below the state average, he added.

McWhorter noted 2,000 acres would go for at least \$4 million. "MEDCO struggled for years to pay for the 640 acres they have. This is an opportunity to get this land for free. We will never get this chance again."

Thompson took issue with McWhorter's allegation that there are no job opportunities here. "In Sunday's Marshall News Messenger, there were three pages of employment opportunities," he said. "The reason our children move away is quality of life. That is very important – the number one issue."

And, Thompson said, tourism would create jobs.

"You think it's going to be done with tourism?" McWhorter asked. "Are you going to vote for a bond issue" to provide necessary funds?

"I didn't say I would," Thompson replied. "Call the question."

When commissioners finally voted, there was applause from an otherwise quiet crowd, behavior for which McWhorter had earlier thanked the group.