

Judge's comment disputed by senator's office

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U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison's Washington office is disputing Harrison County Judge Wayne McWhorter's contention that the senator told him a proposed industrial site at the former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant was "never going to be more than 100 to 200 acres."

In fact, Hutchison spokesman Chris Paulitz said the industrial site could still be the original 1,500 to 2,000 acres first requested and blamed the delay in moving forward on McWhorter, who has not yet held a public hearing. Sen. Hutchison said is key to the process.

"If the judge wants to move forward, it's simple: hold the public meeting, propose a plan and pass a resolution of the commissioners' court. Once the public has spoken, the senator will fully support the community officials request for federal action," Paulitz said.

McWhorter stood by his original quote, saying, "that is an absolutely true statement."

McWhorter said Sen. Hutchison made the remark during a telephone call in which the two discussed how the project could go forward. He acknowledged the senator told him a public hearing would have to be held and that support for the project would have to be overwhelming.

"She pointed out that the environmentalists were strong in the Senate and if they couldn't even move on ANWR (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), then they certainly weren't going to be able to do anything about Caddo unless there was a really strong show of support."

McWhorter said he then mentioned the necessary area as 1,500 to 2,000 acres and Sen. Hutchison said, "Well, judge, it was never going to be more than 100 or 200 acres."

"That took me by such surprise that I didn't know what to say," McWhorter said. "I should have said something, but I just let her go on and we finished the conversation."

McWhorter showed the Marshall News Messenger notes he took on a yellow sheet of legal pad paper the day of the telephone conversation.

"If I hadn't written it down, I might have thought I had slept and forgot about it, but I wrote it down as we were talking. Now I wish I had dated it," he said.

McWhorter said within two days after the conversation he called Hutchison staffer Jamie Moore and asked him to clarify the remark.

"I told him I don't know if the senator misspoke when she said that, but that we had to know. I was trying to give her an easy way out. She could just say she didn't mean to say that. Mr. Moore said he would get me an answer," McWhorter said.

It was the first of four such calls McWhorter said he made to Hutchison staffers. Another call was made by Republican Party County Chairman Sam Moseley, a supporter of the project, to an Austin staffer. Each time, McWhorter said, he was promised an answer but never got one.

Moseley said he thinks Sen. Hutchison simply made a mistake in saying 100 to 200 acres and that her staffers never told her about the questions that were being asked by the local community.

"That's just speculation," Moseley said. "I know this isn't the most important thing she has to think about."

Paulitz acknowledged that "all ranges of acres were discussed with the judge" but said the senator made clear the proposed use and location of the acreage would determine the final size of the project.

McWhorter said he and others who support the project have never wavered in the amount of land they are requesting.

"We have always said we want 1,500-2,000 acres," he said. Several times, they have tried to change it to 1,000 acres and I've said, 'No, we want 1,500 to 2,000 acres'"

In a July 22, 2005, letter provided by Paulitz from Sen. Hutchison to Joseph Whitaker, deputy assistant secretary of Army for installations and housing, the senator twice refers to 1,000 acres in asking for the army to set aside land for economic development.

McWhorter said the change in acreage is not the only difference that has come up in the project since its inception last summer. He said before he agreed to support the project, he wanted assurances he had the senator's support.

"I knew what was going to happen," he said. "I knew it was going to be confrontational. I asked if they were going to back me up and I was assured that they were."

Later, McWhorter said, he was told he needed to get community support together and get the support of the commissioners' court.

"I told them I could get them a 3-2 vote of the commissioners. I told them I couldn't get them 5-0."

McWhorter said he then got Republican commissioners James Greer and Jeffrey Thompson to write letters of support to Sen. Hutchison. He said he was then contacted by the senator's office and told it was not enough, that a public hearing for the community had to be held.

"I knew what was going to happen with a public hearing," McWhorter said. "If there are 60,000 people in this community, 59,000 of them might support the project. But at a meeting, all 1,000 who are opposed are going to show up, while maybe 10 of those who support it are going to be there."

Paulitz said, however, that Sen. Hutchison will not act unless she knows the community as a whole supports the action. He said McWhorter's reluctance to hold a public hearing is what has stopped progress on the project.

"The senator recognizes that there are differing opinions on the future use of the acreage and has taken an even-handed approach, calling for a public meeting and providing an opportunity for all those involved to present their views. When told of the need for a public hearing by Sen. Hutchison this summer, the judge said he would work on it. In several conversations with the senator's staff over the months, he stated he was working on the meeting and never gave her or her staff any indication that a meeting wouldn't take place," Paulitz said.

Paulitz noted an Oct. 11, 2005, story in the News Messenger reported that McWhorter said he would schedule a November public hearing that did not take place.

McWhorter acknowledged the public hearing did not occur as he said it would and there is no longer any active plan for it to be held