

Local Reuse Authority holds first of three public meetings

by Eric L. Jones

About 50 people attended a public meeting held by the Newport Chemical Depot Local Reuse Authority (LRA) at North Vermillion High School Tuesday evening.

The meeting was the first of three general public meetings that will be held during the process of preparing a reuse plan for presentation to the Army. Its main purpose was to introduce residents to representatives of Matrix Design Group, the firm hired by the LRA to help prepare the reuse plan, and to let those representatives outline the process of preparing the plan, as well as hear some suggestions from residents about the future of the depot property.

LRA President Jack Fenoglio said at the beginning of the meeting that the future of the Depot property "will greatly affect the future of

Vermillion County, and in fact several counties around it, for years to come." He explained that the LRA is the group appointed by the county commissioners to officially accept the transfer of the Depot property from the Army once it is no longer needed by the Army.

"In November, the Depot was declared surplus to the Army's needs," Fenoglio said, "and since then, we've been working overtime."

The primary goal of the LRA, according to Fenoglio, is to acquire the property at no, or very little, cost to the county or the LRA. In order to do this, a reuse plan must be developed, which will include agricultural and industrial uses, as well as preservation of resources for hunting, bird-watching and other activities, and to maximize new jobs created. To do this, the LRA has received funding from the Office of

Economic Adjustment and has used that funding to hire Matrix Design Group, Inc., to help complete the reuse plan.

Tim Dreese of Matrix explained that the company has worked all over the country on BRAC (Base Realignment And Closing) processes, and outlined for those present some of the steps that will be taken in developing the reuse plan.

Development of the plan will include studies and assessments of the buildings and infrastructure currently located on the site, land use possibilities, market demands in the region, fiscal impact, and financial feasibility analysis. Public meetings will be held, as well as focus groups, to gather ideas and suggestions, and also to discuss concerns about the plans for the property.

"It's important for the community to stay informed and keep involved" in the process, Dreese said. He said the idea is to look toward replacing and increasing the number of jobs, and use the property to spur growth in the surrounding area, but at the same time to enhance the natural and agricultural resources present.

"It's large enough that many things can happen there," he said. One of the things that Matrix will try to do is identify unique benefits to the property that will bring in users who might not normally be interested. He cautioned, though, that nothing happens overnight, and many of the plans made will be long-term, and could take 10, 15 or even 20 years to become reality.

Dreese, as an example, compared Newport to an even more rural BRAC process that his company worked on — Loring Air Force Base in Maine. That facility lost 1,311 jobs when it closed, but the property now is home to over 20 businesses with over 1,400 jobs.

During the process of preparing the plan, Matrix will try to address the assets and liabilities of the

property, as well as the wants and needs of the community, and whether they are realistic. The plan will include a vision for what the property will look like in the future, and "a road map to get there" as well as priorities for redevelopment and costs.

Dreese said Matrix has already started having individual meetings to gather ideas on targeted industrial opportunities and how to generate high-paying jobs and increase the tax base in the county. He

added that LRA members recently met with top-level Army planners, and that the Army representatives were "very anxious to work with the community" and transfer the property in 2010, if possible. He explained that the transfer must be complete by 2011, but there is hope of making it happen sooner.

Future meetings will include stakeholder interview and focus group meetings, of which some have already been held, Dreese explained. In addition, two more general public meetings will be held. One, during the summer, will be to present Matrix's findings and communicate the vision for the property and the second, near the end of the process, will be to present plan alternatives and recommend a preliminary reuse plan.

Dreese said teen and youth workshops will be held, allowing students to tour the site and present their own ideas. "We've found out they come up with some pretty good ideas and interesting approaches," he said. In addition, a website will be set up soon to update the com-

munity on the progress of the plan and bus tours of the base are being planned for the summer.

Once all of the information is gathered, a workshop will be held with developers to brainstorm how best to get development underway, to establish the criteria for what potential users of the property will need and make sure the reuse plan accommodates those potential needs.

Once the plan is completed, it must be submitted to both the Army and to Housing and Urban Development for approval. Once both have approved the plan, the transfer of the property can begin.

"This will be a 9-month period," Dreese explained, "and we're now in month one, day two." He said most of the next two to three months will be spent gathering information.

Dreese then turned the meeting over to Ken Schroepfel, who said he wanted to hear ideas from those present, including their concerns and their thoughts on what should be done with the property.

A number of ideas were presented during the remainder of the meeting, with several residents speaking in favor of pursuing alternative energy programs such as a windmill farm, solar cells and other sources.

Some residents asked if unique market niches had been identified, and what unique features the plant presented that might attract companies. Dreese mentioned that, for a rural location, Newport is "definitely not remote" given that there is a 4-lane highway (State Road 63) which runs right past the location and connects to both Interstate 70 and Interstate 74. In addition, there is a vast quantity of water resources available. He called the water supply one of the area's key resources, as "it's high quality and there's lots of it." Another benefit is the proximity of several quality universities, including Purdue, Rose-Hulman, Indiana State and Illinois.

Several residents also mentioned pursuing food industries, which are less affected by economic difficulties. One suggested a hydrogen production and/or storage facility somewhere on the site. Dreese mentioned that some of the universities had expressed interest in research facilities on the site, and there had already been interest from food processors as well.

Another resident mentioned that there are a lot of beer-drinkers in the country, and the large water supply might be ideal for a brewery. Others suggested state parks and camping and riding areas on parts of the site that are not developed for industry.

Some residents stressed the importance of doing some short-term as well as long-term development, to see that there are jobs created to help build up the area quickly, in addition to those developments that might be years down the road.

One resident mentioned the lack of communication in the county, with no local radio or television stations, limited Internet access, and one local newspaper. "There should be hundreds more people here," the resident said. She also mentioned that some meetings should be held in the southern portion of the county. Dreese said the next one will be at South Vermillion High School.

One resident asked if the focus group meetings will be open to the public. Dreese said Matrix tries to keep the groups under 20 people to allow for discussion, but the public could come and observe, but not participate. He added that the meetings could be open to the media for reporting.

Another resident mentioned the need for overnight accommodations for when companies bring vendors to visit their plants, because there are "almost no hotels in the county."

County Councilman John Cheeswright said the county has collected no taxes on the property since the Army has been there. He said he would like to see something given back to the community, perhaps using the water and sanitary systems located on the base to provide similar services to towns such as Dana and Newport.

Sheriff Bob Spence added that it is important because Vermillion County Jail receives its water from the Depot, to be sure that service is not interrupted.

It was mentioned that the state has already expressed interest in using part of the property for a fish and wildlife preserve, and that money could be generated from farm land that is currently being leased to farmers by the Army. Other residents suggested that the former VX storage facilities could be used by other companies to store materials on the property.