

Holtec, ELEA court Jal council

CURTIS C. WYNNE
NEWS-SUN



JAL — In an attempt to fill an information void, a Holtec International representative met with the Jal City Council Thursday, but it may have been too little, too late — for now.

The council unanimously approved a resolution in late May opposing interim storage of spent nuclear fuel. The resolution is non-binding since the proposed site is about 40 miles northwest of Jal, although concerns have been raised because area railroad tracks could be used to transport spent nuclear fuel.

Holtec International applied to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission last year to build a \$2.4 billion interim consolidated storage facility, called HI-STORE, located in Lea County near the Eddy County line. The Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance, which owns the 1,000-acre property, is comprised of representatives from Lea and Eddy counties and the cities of Hobbs and Carlsbad.

Waste Control Specialists in Gaines County, Texas, about five miles east of Eunice, also is pursuing a similar application for its location near the New Mexico state line. Both require NRC license approval.

Jal Mayor Stephen Aldridge said Holtec contacted him after the council's resolution requesting an opportunity to present their plan.

“They were given that and they were treated well,” Aldridge said. “They did a good job with their presentation. I think there’s still more work to do.”

Jal City Councilman Mike Orr said his mind is not changed even after Holtec’s Camden, N.J.-based vice president of communications Joy Russell, accompanied by ELEA vice president John Heaton of Carlsbad, spent almost two hours outlining the company’s plan and answering councilors’ questions.

“I am still opposed to it,” Orr said. “I appreciate them coming down and getting their views from their company and the ELEA. I do not feel it is good for Lea County, Jal or any surrounding communities. I believe our safety should be far more important than the revenue they will bring in.”

Orr was one of three councilors who asked Aldridge to put the resolution on the council agenda in May.

“Holtec had never come down to talk to Jal, nor had ELEA,” Orr said. “In fact, most of us, until about three months ago, didn’t even know anything about this.”

About the meeting Thursday, Russell said she appreciated the opportunity to discuss the proposed project.

“I’m honored that the mayor and the council were willing and able to spend so much time with us to allow John Heaton and myself to provide information on the HI-STORE project,” Russell said. “We understand how valuable their time is and truly appreciate the length of time they were able to spend with us (Thursday) evening. We look forward to continuing our discussion with Mayor Aldridge and the council members.”

Aldridge suggested the possibility of a general town hall meeting to give the public a chance to discuss Holtec’s proposal.

“(Thursday), I asked the public to just look, listen and learn and let the council ask questions,” he said, “and we’d try to get Holtec and ELEA to commit to a town hall meeting so the general public could express themselves and ask questions they had.”

Aldridge said Thursday’s meeting was designed to avoid a contentious atmosphere.

“When you mention nuclear waste, especially high level, first you’re going to get an emotional response from people just because of the matter they’re dealing with,” the mayor said. “That makes it difficult because it’s emotion and there’s a tendency for crowds to be a little raucous. I think they (Holtec) were a little gun-shy at first about the type of atmosphere there would be at this meeting. I promised them there wouldn’t be a circus. There’ll be proper decorum. I asked the council members to adhere to that and they did.”

No town hall meeting has yet been set.

Curtis Wynne *may be contacted at* reporter3@hobbsnews.com.