

Missile upgrade project will impact Central Montana

Port Authority working on a plan

By DEB HILL | Reporter

Missile upgrades are coming, and the resulting influx of equipment, supplies and workers will impact Central Montana, Port Authority Chair KellyAnne Terry told board members last week.

The Air Force has been planning for several years for the modernization of America's missile fields, which involves updating the 50-year-old Minute Man missiles to the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent System intercontinental ballistic missiles. Ultimately, more than 400 Minute Man III missiles located across Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota will be replaced.

Malmstrom Air Force Base is scheduled to begin the work of decommissioning the old missiles and updating of silos, communication systems, and other infrastructure in 2023.

"The project in Central Montana is projected to start in 2023 and go through 2026," Terry told the Port Authority board. "There are several impacts we should be ready for."

One of the principal impacts is the arrival of the workforce. "We are a workforce hub," Terry said. "There are two hubs; one at Malmstrom and one in Lewistown."

Hearing that a total of 3,000 people may be working on the GBSD project raised eyebrows at the Port Authority meeting, but Terry said it was not certain how many workers would be based in Lewistown.

"The total number will be split between Malmstrom and Lewistown," she said. "Not all the workers will be on the project for the entire time. Some may stay here for years; some may only be located here for a short time until their part of the project is finished."

Terry said she had received information from a spokesperson who said Northrup Grumman, the project contractor, is

looking at building barracks-style housing.

"They are currently doing the same thing in Kimble, Nebraska," Terry said. "We should take a look at that to see what may happen here."

Terry said she was told there would be a community meeting here in July of 2022 to discuss where the worker housing will be located.

In addition to housing, Terry said the Air Force may need to acquire parcels of around 15 acres in size to build new launch pads or alert facilities. They will also need easements for communication lines.

"With 90% of our area being privately owned, the challenge will be to get the easements," Terry said, adding she did not know whether the Air Force would ultimately need to pay for easements or not.

"The technology aspects of this project could be good for the community, in terms of getting improved IT here," she added.

The Air Force is currently working through the National Environmental Policy Act EIS process. Many property owners have received letters regarding possible use of their land.

"You are receiving this letter because a limited portion of your property may support future GBSD infrastructure. You have been identified as having an ownership interest in property that may require future access for construction and maintenance of a new GBSD utility corridor or a communications tower on a portion of the property," reads part of such a letter dated Nov. 15.

Port Authority to create plan

Port Authority discussion of the project focused on the impact of bringing thousands of workers into the community.

"We need a community group to be working with them [the Air Force and contractor] to ensure whatever happens, happens to the benefit of the

community," said board member Dave Byerly.

County Commissioner Ross Butcher, who serves on a state-wide committee addressing the impact of the GBSD project, said in conversations he's had with the contractor it did not appear they would move families into the area.

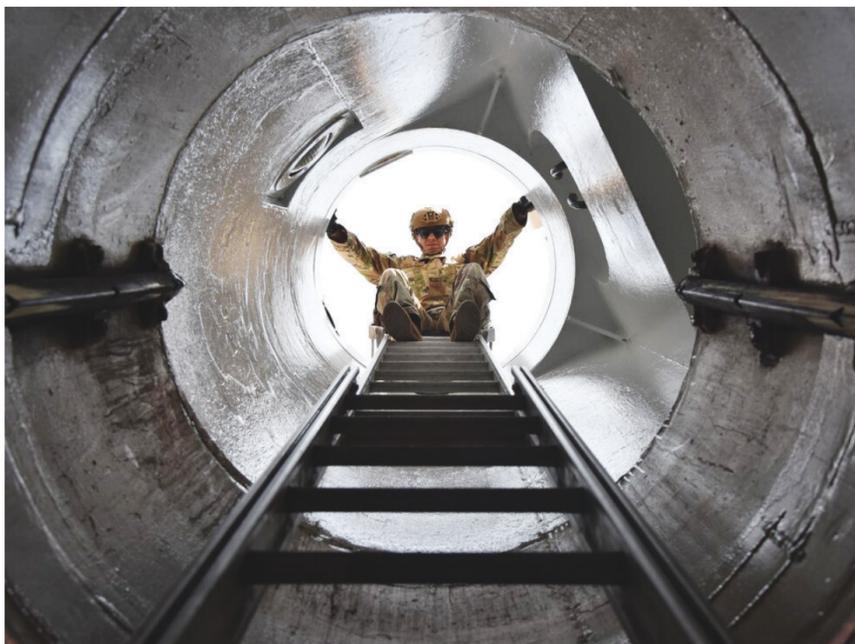
"It is more like just those workers with those specific skills," Butcher said. "But is it 50 at a time, or 200? We don't know; we are still very early on that. We don't want to be flooded, or do something short term that won't work for us long term."

State Senator Dan Bartel said there had not been a lot of communication at the state level about the impacts communities could expect.

"We need a group, including City and County officials, to stay on top of this and make sure citizens are well informed," Bartel said. "This will go faster than people expect, and we don't want the community to be steam rolled."

"We need to create a united front," said board member Cody Langbehn. "Can we get a committee pulled together before our January meeting?"

Langbehn, Wheatley, Bartel, and Terry will form a subcommittee to report back on a plan at the Jan. 12 meeting.



Senior Airman Zachariah Abdul-Aziz with the 341st Missile Security Operations Squadron views his descent for a rappel down an entrance to a launch facility in 2020, near Malmstrom Air Force Base. Air Force personnel are slated to begin upgrades to the missile facilities across Central Montana in 2023, and will reportedly have a presence in Lewistown.

Photo courtesy of Malmstrom Air Force Base, Senior Airman Daniel Brosman

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