

Energy plans for plant coming

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Optimistic officials predict an announcement on the future of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant may be just weeks away.

Charlie Martin, Paducah Economic Development executive vice president, touched on the coming announcement during a talk Friday morning at the Commerce Center in Paducah. Martin said the Department of Energy is working toward having a deal in place by Thanksgiving, or in the weeks directly following.

Business leaders and elected officials met in September with U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz at the Department of Energy in Washington.

“When we met with the DOE, Judge-Executive Van Newberry drew a line in the sand and really pushed for a decision by Thanksgiving,” Martin said. “This community is very supportive of new technology.”

The new technology Martin refers to is General Electric Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment, which would use laser technology to re-enrich high-assay depleted uranium tails. Martin said GE Hitachi has full community support for a move into a portion of the gaseous diffusion plant.

The company submitted a plan for the plant site after the DOE called for requests of interest. GE Hitachi will use the depleted tails on site, where other companies promised to move them, Martin said.

The United States Enrichment Corporation, USEC, announced May 24 it would cease plant operations within the year and lay off the majority of its roughly 1,100 workers.

The closure and job losses fast-tracked the need for new projects at the site.

Local businesses have been bracing for the economic impact of the plant closure, and a quick turnaround to getting a new tenant at the DOE site would be welcomed relief.

“It’s certainly something that a lot of businesses are anxious about,” said Sandra Wilson, president of the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce. “There’s also this great sense of hope ... We are working on a solution all of the time.”

Kentucky U.S. Sens. Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul, along with Rep. Ed Whitfield, released a joint statement Thursday evening saying that they are confident a decision on the site would be coming soon. Newberry said he was encouraged to hear of a possibly pending announcement.

“I told him (Moniz) when we were in Washington — and we were face to face — that we need a decision, and we needed it quickly,” Newberry said. “With what we are hearing, we are keeping our fingers crossed. This would be like an early Christmas present to the community.”