

GE-Hitachi talks still ongoing

Oct 16, 2013 | The Paducah Sun

A partial government shutdown that is handicapping services across the country is having little effect on some redevelopment talks at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant.

Chad Chancellor, Paducah Economic Development president, said General Electric Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment is still negotiating with the U.S. Department of Energy on a project to re-enrich high-assay depleted uranium, called tails, through a new type of laser technology. He said the federal government's budget disagreements that led to a partial shutdown 17 days ago are not hindering project recruitment efforts.

"My talks with them have been the same as before," Chancellor said.

The DOE solicited a call for projects to develop or use assets at the site over the summer through a request for expressions of interest, followed by a request for offers. The submissions are similar to business plans, which detail projects interested companies are requesting. Officials would not release how many responses were received, but word got out that GE-Hitachi responded to both.

The United States Enrichment Corporation, which leases the plant from the DOE for uranium enrichment work, announced on May 24 it would cease operations within the year and lay off the majority of its roughly 1,100 workers. The closure and job losses fast track the need for new projects at the site.

Jim Key, vice president of the United Steelworkers Local 550 in Paducah, said that he is also in on negotiations with GE-Hitachi in a third-party, roundabout way. He said he is awaiting word from the DOE to set up a visit at the company's host site in Wilmington, N.C. Chancellor said that his organization and local, state and federal officials are all adamantly pushing for the GE deal. He said he has heard it could produce anywhere from 300 to 500 jobs, depending on the DOE's negotiations.

"Our support for their project remains steadfast," Chancellor said. "We are supportive if not more supportive now than we were from day one."

He said that Kentucky's federal delegation — senators Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul and Rep. Ed Whitfield — have also not stopped working to bring GE-Hitachi to Paducah. "Our federal delegation, Whitfield, Paul and McConnell and their staff, went out of their way to make this happen," Chancellor said. "We talked with their staff even during the shutdown. They are still staying focused on the project. If this happens, there will be no doubt it happens because of them."

Chancellor hopes to have an answer from the DOE about the GE project by the end of the year.