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Hanford backers want B Reactor in national park

By ANNETTE CARY
Tri-City Herald

Supporters of Hanford's historic B Reactor are preparing to fight to have it reconsidered as a national park.

A draft study released by the National Park Service in December concluded that only part of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory National Landmark District in New Mexico should be considered for a Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

It excluded Hanford's B Reactor and historic facilities at the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge, Tenn., site, although the park service might be willing to play a limited role at the sites.

But the draft study's arguments for excluding B Reactor from a possible national park "are very, very weak," said Maynard Plahuta, president of the B Reactor Museum Association.

On Tuesday, representatives of the museum association, the Tri-City Development Council, the Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau and the Hanford Communities - which includes Hanford-area cities, counties and ports - agreed that the best course for B Reactor's future is to continue to push for inclusion in a national park.

There seems to be some support for that at Department of Energy headquarters.

"Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and Hanford should be considered and treated as coequals," said F.G. (Skip) Gosling, the DOE federal preservation officer and chief historian, in comments included in the draft study's appendix.

"Manhattan Project activities came together at Los Alamos, which has perhaps the greatest public recognition, but Oak Ridge and Hanford are equally significant and indispensable, both in the development and deployment of the atomic bomb and for a balanced public interpretation of the Manhattan Project," he said.

He called B Reactor and two facilities at Oak Ridge - the X-10 Graphite Reactor and the Y-12 Beta-3 Racetracks - "undoubtedly the crown jewels of the Manhattan Project historic assets."

He supported making all three sites part of a Manhattan Project National Historical Park, but having DOE continue to own and maintain certain facilities - including B Reactor - and ensure safety and security.

B Reactor, which looks much as it did during World War II, was the world's first production-scale reactor. It produced plutonium for the first nuclear explosion and for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, helping to end the war.

If B Reactor is part of a national park, it has the National Park Service's international reputation and marketing behind it to attract visitors, said Hanford-area community leaders Tuesday.

The reactor also would have a more assured long-term future, rather than relying on the ongoing interest and enthusiasm of nonprofits or other groups to keep it operating as a museum.

The park service has experience in conducting tours and handling crowds, said Kris Watkins, president of the visitor and

convention bureau. The park service involvement also would give visitors assurance that touring the nuclear reactor is safe, she said.

The draft study said that making Hanford and Oak Ridge part of a national park was not feasible because of the "unreasonably high cost of management." But supporters of B Reactor pointed out that because DOE would continue to play a role, it could be a bargain for the park service.

The park service also was concerned that visitor access would be limited due to safety and national security concerns. But B Reactor already is open for tours. About 1,440 people were admitted on public tours offered on certain Saturdays last year, and those tours drew visitors from 23 states, according to data from Mission Support Alliance.

Representatives of organizations supporting B Reactor plan to prepare and send a joint letter to the National Park Service reflecting the consensus that it should be part of the national park system.

In addition the public may comment on plans for B Reactor at public meetings from 2 to 4 p.m. and from 7 to 9 p.m. Jan 21 at the Red Lion Hanford House, 802 George Washington Way, Richland.

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