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Nye County increases budget for Yucca Mountain



U.S. Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio and Rep. Cresent Hardy, R-Nev., walk along the train tracks during a congressional tour of the Yucca Mountain exploratory tunnel Thursday, April 9, 2015. (Sam Morris/Las Vegas Review-Journal) Follow Sam Morris on Twitter @sammorrisRJ

By Daria Sokolova
Pahrump Valley Times

Nye County has increased its budget for activities associated with Yucca Mountain, the county's financial records show.

According to the documents, Nye County's fiscal year 2018 budget has \$60,000 in the administration department for an Akerman LLP contract which was previously paid out of the contingency fund. The Miami-based lobbying firm represents the county in federal lobbying activities including Yucca Mountain.

In addition, the Nye County Planning Department will get \$20,000 for travel for Yucca Mountain projects. The figure will cover airfare and hotels for the county employees who will travel to Washington, D.C. to represent the county in the matter.

Nye County's budget has been recovering after a few years of low revenues that had been preceded by the recession. Nye County Commission Chairman Dan Schinhofen said the county previously did not have the funds for former scientists and county representatives to travel to various meetings on Yucca Mountain.

"We hope that our federal reps will at least consider hearing the science," Schinhofen said. "The best outcome is that the DOE (Department of Energy) engage with the NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) and start to plan the hearings so that the people of Nevada can finally hear what the national labs and the staff at NRC already know, that it is safe to operate and construct."

The increase in the county's funding happened to be after the Trump administration allocated \$120 million to the DOE for the restart of Yucca Mountain's licensing proceedings. Nye County welcomed the Trump administration's move, while most Nevada elected officials vowed to fight the proposed funding.

Lorinda Wichman, another Nye County commissioner, said it is "extremely important" to have Nye County's representation at the table during talks on Yucca Mountain.

"After all, Nye County is the location for Yucca Mountain," Wichman said. "I believe if Nye County isn't at the table then Nye County is on the menu."

Future plans

Schinhofen, Nye County's main proponent of Yucca Mountain said he will travel to the nation's capital on June 13-16 for the Energy Communities Alliance meeting, a membership organization of local governments affected by DOE's activities.

Schinhofen said he also plans to meet with the DOE and U.S. Rep. Ruben Kihuen, D-North Las Vegas, whose district includes Nye County, to discuss other issues such as ambulance Emergency Management Services for the central and northern parts of the county.

The stalled Yucca Mountain should be completed after feds spent \$15 billion on the project, Schinhofen said. He also urged they follow the Nuclear Waste Policy Act that in 1987 designated Yucca Mountain as the only place to store the nation's nuclear waste.

"This will be a national security site ...and we are a nation of laws. In over 35 years, the law has not been changed so let's get on with it and finally put this issue to bed," Schinhofen said.

“If it is not found, in the hearings, to be able to construct and operate safely no one will want it, but if it is found safe, who would say no to a multi-billion dollar project that would rival the Hoover Dam Project,” Schinhofen said.

State continues opposition

The omnibus funding bill that was approved by Congress in May did not include any money for Yucca Mountain. However, the federal fiscal year 2018 budget, which begins Oct. 1, could include the funding.

“If our federal reps vote against the funding, they will be voting against having EMS (Emergency Management Services) and ambulance service for the greater part of our county. Not to mention other services that these funds can help us resurrect,” Schinhofen said.

In May, the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means committees approved a two-year \$3.8 million budget for the Agency for Nuclear Projects, the top state agency charged with fighting Yucca Mountain.

Of that total, \$1.3 million will be spent fighting the expected restart of Yucca Mountain licensing proceedings, according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal report.

In addition, the Nevada’s attorney general’s office budget includes \$3.4 million over two years to fight the project, the report said.

Most of Nevada’s elected officials, including Gov. Brian Sandoval and Attorney General Adam Laxalt, are opposed to the restart of Yucca Mountain’s licensing proceedings.

On May 17, the Nevada Senate approved Assembly Joint Resolution 10, a measure that opposes any attempts by Congress to store the nation’s high-level nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain.

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