New Iberia Air Base

Matter Of Frustration For Area

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NEW IBERIA, La. (AP) - The short-lived Navy air base at New Iberia was closed nearly four years ago but it remains a matter of frustration and controversy for area residents and the federal government.

Nearly 2,400 acres of land, once part of the New Iberia Naval Auxiliary Air Facility, is tied up today, tied up by four years of disposal frustration and entangled in a little known and infrequently used facet of federal law that permits land swaps.

Final disposition of the land has already taken more time than elapsed from the facility's dedication in 1969 to its demise in 1974.

No one's guess

The end may be in sight — BUT how the remainder of the base will be utilized is still anyone's guess.

The disposition question already has maneuvered its way through a thicket of government priorities, in a state Supreme Court case, two defeated local bond issues and the usual feasibility studies.

The base originally cost the government $2.3 million for land and $19.7 million for its M-1 brick and concrete permanent buildings and 65 semipermanent structures. Along the way, Iberia Parish has picked up 1,450 acres of the base for an airport and the Gulf South Research Institute has acquired 465 acres and several buildings.

But the local bombshell came in December when the community discovered that the General Services Administration was considering a trade for the remaining 2,400 acres. GSA likes to swap when it has a surplus at one place and wants to acquire land somewhere else.

"Excess Category"

After Iberia Parish residents twice voted down bond issues to buy the remaining land for an industrial park, GSA put the parcel of idle land into its "excess" category.

Now GSA is contemplating whether it needs the land — to dispose of for property in New Orleans.

GSA officials talk warily about swap possibilities. "We have to be real careful," said James Taylor, regional director for the property management and disposal service. "Some of the people in the parish have their own ideas.

The land swap possibility arose when GSA won authorization for a federal building on a city block in New Orleans but didn't get the money to buy the land.

Major backer of the New Orleans building is U.S. Rep. Edward Hebert, a top-ranking Democrat from New Orleans, and some New Iberians suspect he might even be pushing the swap to expedite the project.

Business Partner

Hebert's son-in-law, John Doerle, however, is a business partner of Mark R. Pharr Jr., a leader of the swap opposition, and is a law partner of U.S. Rep. Patrick T. Caffery, a New Iberia Democrat, who is on record favoring public use of the bulk of the land.

"It was assumed at first that only New Iberia land was involved in the swap. But the GSA said it also was offering up to 26 acres from the New Orleans Naval Support Activity, located on the Algiers side of the Mississippi River.

James R. Winner, chief of the real property division in GSA's Fort Worth, Texas, regional office, said the Algiers and New Iberia land together would not be sufficient to equal the value of the New Orleans land sought.

The middleman on the New Iberia swap proposal is Francis Doerle, who won't say who he is representing in the effort to pick up the old air base property. He says only that he wants the New Iberia property for industrial development.

Doerle has been contacting the 17 owners of parcels of the New Orleans city block and says that if the GSA is ready to deal he would acquire options on enough of the property to equal the value of the New Iberia land. He said he has no interest in the Algiers property.

"Disparages 'Fly Boys'"

Doerle, once a member of the Iberia Parish Police Jury, disparages the "fly boys" on the city's Aviation Advisory Committee who want most of the remaining facility land to add to the airport for a crosswind runway and other purposes.

They envision a major regional airport in the growing area near the Gulf Coast.

"The runway the parish already operates is a lengthier 8,000 feet and could be expanded to 14,000. That would handle anything now on aeronautical drawing boards. But an FAA official, speaking privately, discounted the idea of a supersonic or jumbo jet ever being landed in this area of a quarter-million people.

In making a bid for more airport land, the police jury is taking advantage of a 90-day delay in property disposition which the GSA granted Jan. 9 after Caffery intervened.

Airport advocates met with regional FAA officials in Houston in mid-February to lay the groundwork for their application for 1,600 acres. It normally takes about three months for a formally submitted request or act to be acted upon — which would push the delay past the April 9 delay date.

North Loss Now

When the parish was trying to win approval of its bond issues, the fair market value of the land and buildings was estimated at $1,965,000. But the value of the land is now assumed to be worth less than that since it does not include several million dollars for buildings.

The potential cost of the New Orleans black was estimated a year ago at $1,913,000, according to a statement by Rep. Hebert at the time. Doerle claimed land prices in the area have shot up since announcement of plans for the $24.8 million federal building project.

Doerle estimated that between one-third and one-fourth of the New Orleans Block now has equal the value of the New Iberia land.

GSA officials say several holders of New Orleans parcels are interested in the Algiers land, devoted mostly to deteriorating warehouses facilities. But the Navy itself presently wants about four of the 26 acres at Algiers returned to it.