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Picher snubs proposal

Mayor, council want town development, not buyout, wetlands

By Gary Garton
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PICHER, Okla. - Turning its back on a state proposal to buy the town and create a wetlands because of lead contamination left from the area's mining, the Picher City Council voted Thursday night to try to buy all the Bureau of Indian Affairs-administered land in town and make it available to private buyers.

"I don't think the wetlands thing is going to happen in my lifetime," said Mayor Sam Freeman. "I was elected to try to make this town a better place, and that's what I'm going to do."

Freeman told the council he is compiling an accurate map of all the "Indian land" within the city limits and will take it to the BIA when he is finished.

The federal bureau controls the leasing of land owned by absentee American Indian tribal members. In Picher, the land is owned by members or descendants of the Quapaw Tribe based on original government allotments.

"I was approached by someone at the BIA a while back about the possibility of doing something like this," Freeman said.

"I've got people calling or contacting me almost every week wanting to know if there is property available in town to move in or build a home. They're not afraid of the lead, but the rental and lease fees on BIA land makes it prohibitive for a lot of folks."

Picher recently completed construction of new water system with state and federal grants, and a grant-funded sewer system rehabilitation project is under way. The town also is starting street repairs with money provided by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"We've got a lot going for us, and there's no sense sitting here waiting," Freeman said. "We need to go ahead and try to make Picher grow."

He said his buyout proposal would not include properties containing chat piles or property not already attended to in the EPA's lead cleanup.

Freeman said a recommendation by Gov. Frank Keating's Tar Creek Task Force to buy out the properties in Picher and Cardin and create a "world-class wetlands" to cover lead-contaminated soil doesn't seem likely to happen.

"The EPA and state are still waiting on the White House Environmental Council's report, and they were here back in January," Freeman said. "Now the EPA is having to curtail its Superfund budget. I just don't see the wetlands happening."

John Dalgarn, land specialist with the local BIA agency in Miami, could not be reached after the meeting for comment.

John Sparkman, an outspoken proponent of a federal buyout and the wetlands proposal, said he was surprised by the City Council's move. "I think when it does come down, the White House Council report will be favorable to the proposal, and the state is still 100 percent behind that," he said. "If that is the case, then I think they'll find the money somewhere to get it done."

At the City Council meeting, the town's attorney, Neil Wilson, said that if the BIA is receptive to Freeman's project, the town could create a redevelopment authority and apply for low-interest loans to buy the land.

The most recent EPA cleanup action in Picher has been the replacement of lead-contaminated topsoil from BIA properties. The work continued on federally supervised land because Oklahoma did not approve \$4 million in matching funds for cleanup of private yards. The state decided to appropriate \$300,000 in matching funds to start an EPA cleanup of lead-contaminated school properties in Miami and some land easily accessible to children in Picher.

After hearing Freeman's report on his activities to map the Indian land and his intent to buy it for the town, the City Council voted unanimously to back the project.