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School board probes bidding practice

Firm complains it was locked out of offers

By David Keim
News-Sentinel staff writer

Knox County school board members want to know whether taxpayer dollars are being wasted because building officials are choosing a particular subcontractor without competitive bids.

gets a monopoly because the cost goes up," board member Sam Anderson said, "and in times of tight budgets you have to look at cost savings everywhere you can."

The school board will receive 40 percent of the county's new 55-cent property tax increase, including 8 cents for school construction.

Board members' concern focuses on a dispute fought largely behind the scenes since last fall between KBM Contractors and the school system's facilities department.

KBM installs controls that allow the computerized monitoring of heating and air-conditioning systems. The firm says it has been "blackballed" by the school system, forbidden from bidding on work like the renovation and expansion of Bearden High School.

The school system required that KBM competitor Johnson Controls do the work, accepting no other bids although Johnson Controls bid \$396,000, almost \$200,000 more than KBM.

The school system's project facilities manager, Doug Burdette, explained that there have been problems with KBM at other schools and that Johnson Controls

was the only other firm doing much work in local schools. KBM still will be able to bid on future projects, Burdette said.

The school board is looking into the matter.

"Seems like the problem is that the Bearden bid method doesn't allow for other companies to bid on projects, and the price is going up," Anderson said.

Board member Steve Hunley plans to

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DOE gives 3,000 acres for refuge; city fathers not pleased

By Frank Munger
News-Sentinel Oak Ridge bureau

OAK RIDGE - On a very warm day in East Tennessee, U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson warmed the hearts of environmentalists.

Richardson signed documents Wednesday creating a wildlife refuge on 3,000 picturesque acres on the government's Oak Ridge reservation. The property includes about 20 miles of shoreline along Melton Hill Lake.

"I just think it's important to give back," Richardson said at the outdoor ceremony near historic Freels Bend Cabin. He said Oak Ridge workers delivered on important missions during the Cold War and deserved something in return.

Most of the Department of Energy's assistance to the local community has been on economic development, but there needs to be a balance, Richardson said.

"We're returning the green to the region in more ways than one," he said.

"It takes an ... environment that can answer to people's human lives. They need places to fish and hunt, to swim and breathe good, warm air. They need areas where they recreate their spirits after a week of hard work. The Oak Ridge reserve can be such a place."

The initial agreement is for five years, but Richardson said the intent is for the refuge to be permanent.

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U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson holds up Bradley Hensley, 9, and says, "This land's for you, kid," during the announcement of a conservation area. Bradley was part of a science camp at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and had given Richardson a T-shirt with other campers. At left is Leah Dever, who will become the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge manager in July.

Margaret Bennett/News-Sentinel staff

Richardson: DOE changes could cost jobs

By Frank Munger
News-Sentinel Oak Ridge bureau

OAK RIDGE - If an independent agency is established as proposed to run the nuclear weapons program, that would hurt Oak Ridge and possibly lead to a loss of jobs, U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson said Wednesday.

"I don't want to restructure Oak Ridge, and I would have to under this

new formula, which quite frankly has not been properly defined," Richardson said during a visit to DOE's Oak Ridge reservation.

The Chinese espionage scandal has sparked momentum in Washington for an independent agency to better protect the nation's nuclear materials and weapons secrets.

Richardson is opposed to such a move

and suggests that his recent restructuring of DOE, such as naming a security czar and a new counterintelligence chief, will help alleviate the concerns.

However, at a joint committee hearing Tuesday in the Senate, Richardson appeared to be losing the battle. Many of the Senate leaders favored recommendations put forth by ex-Sen. Warren Rudman, chairman of the president's Foreign

Intelligence Advisory Board.

Rudman said a separate, "semi-autonomous" agency is essential to give the weapons facilities overdue attention.

"What I object to is an independent agency that I have no control over," Richardson said. "An independent agency would have an adverse impact here on Oak Ridge because it would dilute the responsibility (Oak Ridge) has a science component and it had a weapons component, and science should not be subordi-

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Western

Lawmakers ask