Tester stands firm on CFAC cleanup

By RICHARD HANNERS Hungry Horse News | Posted: Wednesday, March 25, 2015 8:40 am

Sen. Jon Tester met with Columbia Falls city officials and business leaders at Freedom Bank on March 20 to discuss a Superfund cleanup at the closed Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. smelter site.

Many of the two dozen people at the meeting expressed concerns about Glencore, the Swiss-based commodities trader that owns the smelter site, and news about the Environmental Protection Agency, which has taken the lead in the cleanup effort.

'We need to know if the EPA will hold Glencore accountable'

Sen. Jon Tester talks to concerned business owners and residents last week about a Superfund-type cleanup at the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. site.

"At our last meeting about CFAC, we didn't know what Glencore was going to do for sure," Tester said. "We spoke about the EPA working with the community and the community driving the bus. Taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for the cleanup at CFAC — that's why we got the EPA involve. Once we get the site cleaned up, we can re-purpose it to benefit the Flathead and state economies."

Mayor Don Barnhart said he appreciated Gov. Steve Bullock's help in getting the CFAC site proposed for listing on the Superfund's National Priorities List.

"That provides a good opportunity to get testing done," he said. "That's what we've wanted all along — to find out the status of the site."

Freedom Bank president Don Bennett said he spoke with Glencore representatives about a number of issues over the past 15 years without any concrete results.

"They just tell us what they want to appease us," he said. "They're a dollar and cents business — it has to make money."

That said, Bennett noted that Glencore wasn't the only company that potentially contaminated the smelter site.

"It goes all the way back to the 1950s," he said. "Glencore made a lot of money, but it might not be a good tact to blame them for everything. We need to get all the parties involved."

ED_002345B_00016548-00001

Tester aide Virginia Sloan noted that the EPA and Montana Department of Environmental Quality were working to track down all the potential responsible parties.

"We need to know if the EPA will hold Glencore accountable," Tester said. "But taxpayer dollars could end up being involved — there's no way around that."

City manager Susan Nicosia asked about Rep. Ryan Zinke's letter to Bullock asking him not to support putting the plant site on the Superfund list.

"How can we address the stigma of being on the Superfund list?" she asked.

"If I thought that Glencore would clean up the site without the EPA, I'd say go ahead," Tester answered. "What will kill your community is a hundred million dollar water treatment plant if the contamination affects your water supply."

Tester also noted that economic opportunities will exist once the site is cleaned up.

"Several businesses have already contacted me about using the site," he said.

Attacking the EPA is part of a pattern, Tester said.

"The EPA is seen as the bogeyman, but not getting the site cleaned up — that's a black eye you don't want," he said.

Barnhart asked Tester to talk to Zinke and Sen. Steve Daines about getting their support in cleaning up the site for redevelopment.

"I'll get my staff involved with theirs and talk to Steve personally, but it looks like Ryan may have already drawn a line in the sand," Tester said. "The goal here is the same for Steve and Ryan — to get the place cleaned up and put back to work."

ED_002345B_00016548-00002