

SOUTHWESTERN ILLINOIS

Kern proposes St. Clair County as ideal NGA site

Jun 2, 2015, 1:26pm CDT

Mary Shapiro

This story is part of the Business Journal's coverage on the business community in Southwestern Illinois. Pick up a copy of this week's print edition and the focus section, "Doing Business in Southwestern Illinois."

Free land with easy access and many amenities are among reasons St. Clair County could be a perfect site for the relocated western headquarters of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, according to St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern.

But it's competing with other potential sites: in north St. Louis adjacent to the former Pruitt-Igoe housing project, in Fenton at the former Chrysler plant property and in Mehlville at the former General American Life call center. NGA's current western headquarters is near the Anheuser-Busch brewery in south St. Louis. Officials have said the facility has become outdated.

Kern said he feels the best site for construction of a new \$1.6 billion NGA facility, with an accompanying 3,100 jobs, would be on about 200 acres of what's now farmland in unincorporated St. Clair County, directly outside the fence of Scott Air Force Base on property owned by MidAmerica St. Louis Airport.

"While the NGA is looking at about 200 acres, there are hundreds of acres available there for any expansion of the site if the NGA requires it," Kern said of the St. Clair County site.

The site is close to a MetroLink stop in Shiloh, and the system could be extended to this property, he said.

"Additionally, this site is directly adjacent to a new exit 21 being constructed on Interstate 64, which, after it opens next year, would provide direct access," Kern said, adding that any permitting "would be easy because it's all within our purview."

Also, all utilities are directly adjacent to the property, Kern said.

"And we have no employment head tax, as St. Louis does, so there would be an immediate 1 percent raise for all NGA employees," he said.

The NGA's eastern headquarters is located just outside the Fort Belvoir Army base in Springfield, Virginia.

“We are proposing this site at Scott, directly outside the fence of another military base,” Kern said. “Another factor about our site is that USTRanscom (United States Transportation Command) is based at Scott, and they are a major customer of the NGA, so they’d be located right by a customer of theirs.”

He said the Air Force already owns and Scott Air Force Base manages the current NGA site in St. Louis, so there’s an existing relationship.

And the land being proposed would be transferred to the NGA for no cost, he said.

The relocation would add a lot of commerce to the area, Kern said.

“I’m sure some home sales would go along with any relocation, because 30 percent of current NGA employees now live in Illinois anyway,” he said.

The site is only 21 miles from the Mississippi River, Kern said, with an easy commute and limited traffic going east in the morning. Kern said that during recent public hearings on the issue in the area, there were no detractors — including at one hearing in O’Fallon, Illinois, that drew almost 500 people.

“Mayors and public officials in communities around Scott such as Shiloh, Belleville, O’Fallon, Lebanon and Mascoutah are in full support of this effort and willing to do what it takes to bring the NGA here,” Kern said.

Terry Beach, economic development director of St. Clair County and head of the county’s intergovernmental grants department, agreed that the St. Clair site would be optimal for the NGA relocation.

Having the NGA relocate to St. Clair County would affect the area in a tremendously positive way, Beach said.

“They have a lot of suppliers and vendors to provide services to facilities, and this move would increase opportunities for businesses on our side of the river to bid or participate in services,” he said.

As NGA employees of baby boomer age retire, it could open up more employment opportunities for Illinois residents, especially those exiting the Air Force at Scott, who would have cyber skills and similar training, Beach said.

“Even having all the construction jobs here would be tremendous — this would be among the largest construction projects in the greater St. Louis region and have a major impact on the construction industry,” Beach said.

“NGA employees would regularly use restaurants and other local businesses.”

Since the NGA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Defense, NGA employees also would have access to Scott for amenities offered by the base, he said.

“While any Metro extension to the site from Shiloh would be underway, we’d be willing to run shuttle buses for employees if needed from Shiloh to the NGA facility,” Beach said.

An environmental assessment on all four possible relocation sites is now underway by the Corps of Engineers, Beach said, adding that a final decision, called the record of decision, is due March 2016 to announce the relocation. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Kansas City office was chosen to find a potential site for the new NGA relocated facility.

Mary Shapiro is a St. Louis freelance writer.