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GSA officials vow good faith on courthouse site

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WASHINGTON - Federal officials overseeing development of a \$130 million courthouse in Harrisburg sought to reassure skeptical lawmakers on Wednesday that they are working in good faith.

Pennsylvania lawmakers welcomed the news, but remain cautiously optimistic based on their experiences with the U.S. General Services Administration.

It's that skepticism that motivated Congress to include language in a spending bill restricting GSA's ability to spend money on the project.

Harrisburg Mayor Stephen R. Reed, speaking Wednesday night at a meeting of Right Site Harrisburg, an organization seeking to have GSA put the courthouse in midtown Harrisburg, said he saw the "arrogance" of GSA during a Dec. 11 meeting with federal lawmakers.

"I'm sorry they did not make an audio recording of that meeting," Reed said. "It confirmed your worst suspicions. They are God -- and they don't have to listen to you."

Federal lawmakers would bar the GSA from spending money on the courthouse until the agency completes a study comparing the city's preferred site at Sixth and Reily streets and the agency's Third and Walnut streets site. Congress passed the bill Tuesday.

GSA regional administrator Barbara Shelton said Wednesday that the agency has been working with lawmakers and local officials "to reach a solution that meets everyone's needs."

"We are doing what has been asked of us -- and doing it in good faith," she said.

Craig Peiffer of Right Site Harrisburg said his group will be conducting its own cost benefit analysis on the Sixth and Reily site to compare it with any study sanctioned by GSA.

Federal officials are expected to be in Harrisburg next month to listen to residents' positions on the courthouse site, Reed said. A date has not been set.

The agency has been conducting a study of the two sites as directed by House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman James Oberstar, Shelton said.

"We are close to completion of that analysis, which includes a new economic-impact report by a respected independent third party, further investigation into federal investment in the city, and fresh perspectives from Harrisburg residents and key stakeholders," said Shelton, a Harrisburg native.

GSA's review has included meetings with dozens of businesses and civic associations in Harrisburg, Shelton said.

"GSA has a solid track record of working with local communities to find a solution that works best for all parties," she said. "We've done it in Erie, in Scranton, in Pittsburgh and in many other cities."

Shelton's response was welcome news to U.S. Rep. Tim Holden, D-Schuylkill County, who said Wednesday the lawmakers felt they had little choice but to force the agency's hand.

The lawmakers worried the GSA would forge ahead by spending money to buy property or do other preliminary work at the site of the current courthouse that would make it difficult to choose another site.

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