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State, feds to return to table over West Valley

By CAROLYN THOMPSON
Associated Press Writer

BUFFALO — State and federal energy officials are poised to end their nine-month standoff over how to proceed with the cleanup of the West Valley nuclear facility.

The two sides are scheduled to meet later this month to discuss resuming negotiations, authorities said Thursday.

William Flynn, president of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, called the announcement "a major step in assuring that the work at the site moves forward in a productive and timely manner."

The state and U.S. Department of Energy are at odds over who should be responsible for the long-term monitoring and maintenance of the 220-acre site 30 miles southeast of Buffalo, once the high-level nuclear waste is removed. Each side believes the other should take responsibility for the Cattaraugus County site.

After 20 months of talks, federal energy officials in January declared an impasse in negotiations.

Flynn said he was confident the next round of talks, under a new presidential administration, would be more successful. He said he will meet Sept. 18 with DOE Undersecretary Robert Card with the hope of bringing the negotiating teams back together in October.

"Based upon the communications that we've had so far, I'm very optimistic that these will be productive negotiations," Flynn said.

A government report issued in June said the feud between the state and federal government has delayed cleanup of the site. The report from the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said the delay could add hundreds of millions of dollars to cleanup costs.

The project received more bad news when President Bush's budget proposal allocated \$95 million for West Valley, \$10 million less

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than the project had asked for, and the House leadership slashed it to \$85 million. The Senate is in the process of bringing it back to \$95 million.

Project officials have warned layoffs are possible. The facility now employs 725 high-tech workers with an average salary of \$65,000.

West Valley was the only factory designed to recharge fuel cells worn out at nuclear power plants. It operated from 1966 to 1972, when it was closed because it was dangerous and inefficient.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the West Valley Demonstration Project Act, making the state and federal government partners in the cleanup. The DOE pegs the total cleanup costs at \$4.5 billion and estimates the project will last another 40 years.