Possible sale could speed Pilgrim decommissioning plan

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By Christine Legere, Cape Cod Times

PLYMOUTH - Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station may be sold to a company whose sole focus is the efficient decommissioning of nuclear power plants.

That could mean the difference between the old retired reactor and accompanying buildings sitting abandoned on a contaminated site for another 60 years - the likely scenario under its current owner Entergy Corp. - or the property being cleaned up and ready for reuse about a dozen years after the plant closes. Pilgrim is expected to permanently shut down in June 2019.

Entergy spokesman Patrick O’Brien confirmed an “exploratory process” is already underway for the sale of the Plymouth plant as well as the company’s Palisades plant in Michigan, set to close in October 2018. The buyer is Accelerated Decommissioning Partners, a newly formed partnership of AREVA Nuclear Materials of Washington, D.C., and New York-based NorthStar Group Services.

AREVA Nuclear Materials specializes in decommissioning, spent fuel management, cleanup and closure of nuclear sites, while NorthStar’s expertise lies in comprehensive environmental assessment, deconstruction, demolition and nuclear decommissioning.

Former state Sen. Daniel Wolf, a Harwich Democrat and longtime Pilgrim critic, called the possible sale “really exciting news.”

“You have an entity whose only focus is on decommissioning; that’s been set up for that sole purpose,” Wolf said. “That’s got to be good news.”
NorthStar is already in the process of purchasing the closed Entergy-owned Vermont Yankee plant. The company, which subcontracted AREVA to help decommission Yankee, promises to have the buildings dismantled and the 125-acre site cleaned up by 2030, 45 years sooner than the schedule Entergy had previously submitted to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

As part of the deal, Entergy will transfer all the highly radioactive spent fuel now stored in a pool into robust concrete dry casks by the projected property transfer date of 2018, two years earlier than planned.

If Pilgrim is sold, ADP would get the property, buildings and spent fuel, which it would oversee until the federal government provides central storage for the radioactive waste.

“Other than getting through the next two years of the reactor running, maintenance, oversight and the security of the spent fuel are the biggest issues,” Wolf said. “Any business or corporation that would expedite our goals, I welcome.”

State Sen. Viriato “Vinny” deMacedo, R-Plymouth, also expressed optimism over the news of a possible sale. “At the end of the day, my desire is for prompt decommissioning, and it sounds as though that’s what they will try to do,” he said.

DeMacedo said he and fellow legislators were told of the possible sale Monday during a meeting with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

“The NRC assured us that it will be a public process that will allow for input,” deMacedo said.

The state Legislature approved the establishment of a decommissioning panel comprised of state appointees, local officials and citizens. The senator said that panel would be scrutinizing any transfer of property and decommissioning.

The transfer of license would also undergo a comprehensive review by the NRC.

“Our primary focus will be on whether the proposed new owner has the technical and financial qualifications to safely and thoroughly carry out the radiological decommissioning of the facility,” agency spokesman Neil Sheehan
said.

Whoever owns Pilgrim and is responsible for decommissioning will be given the $900 million trust fund to help cover costs.

“We have to make sure there is some level of responsibility provided the $900 million is not sufficient,” deMacedo said. “Then how does it get done? They have to prove they can do it financially.”

DeMacedo said there are a lot of questions that still must be answered but he's cautiously optimistic.

“I hope this is a good thing so we don't have a building sitting in SAFSTOR for 60 years,” deMacedo said. “Maybe 20 years from now, the property can be back on the tax rolls.”

AREVA spokesman Curtis Roberts said the upcoming year will be spent calculating decommissioning costs for Pilgrim and Palisades, “This phase is to define all that,” he said.

While Pilgrim critics remain concerned that taxpayers will be left paying additional costs if the plant’s decommissioning fund runs dry, Roberts expressed confidence in the company’s ability to maximize those dollars.

Sheehan also stressed that the NRC would scrutinize the buyer’s corporate structure to close any loopholes for running out before the job is done.

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