

Firetree withdraws offer

Officials from Firetree Ltd. confirmed last Thursday that the company has withdrawn its bid for Laurelton Center. But while the company says it is abandoning plans for a drug treatment facility on the property, it is considering suing the state because of delays in completing the deal.

Company president William C. Brown cited costs caused by the delays as the company's reason for pulling out of the deal. "We are sorry that this has resulted, but Firetree has not been allowed any alternative because our transactional costs are ballooning because of the delay and non-signature," Brown wrote in a letter dated Jan. 25 to Donald Cunningham, the state secretary of General Services.

The letter also said that an agreement of sale was twice supposed to be signed but was delayed by state officials. Brown said Firetree expected the deal to close during the week of Jan. 17, but that was pushed back to Jan. 25 and postponed again.

According to Brown Firetree has lost a lot of money in attempting to finalize the contract. The company put down a deposit of \$88,300, which they have asked to have returned to them. Brown attributed the department's failure to sign the contracts to action taken by state Rep. Russell Fairchild, R-85 of Lewisburg, and state Sen. Jake Corman, R-34 of Bellefonte.

Brown claims that because of unfounded assertions by Rep. Fairchild and Sen. Corman, the contract was not signed. Both Fairchild and Corman have opposed the deal, repeatedly saying it should come down to the approval of the public. Firetree's proposal generated widespread opposition from many area residents.

Brown's letter concluded with what appeared to be the threat of legal action. "Fire tree expects that it will take appropriate legal action in regard to this contract," wrote Brown. "Please maintain any and all notes, messages and other documents relating to this aborted transaction in the event there is legal action."

Talks between the state and Firetree started in December. There were three other bids on the property. Woodward Camp submitted a \$10 bid. The two others bids, both from unidentified compa-

nies, were: \$10,000 and \$1. Both of those bidders were planning juvenile detention centers at Laurelton.

What Firetree's withdrawal means for the future of the site is uncertain. It has been costing the state an estimated \$1 million annually since 1998 to maintain the 343-acre property. According to Frank Kane, press secretary for the Department of General Services, state officials will be examining all of their options.

One option that likely won't be considered, however, is moving down the list of bids as submitted in the most recent round of bidding. "I don't think we'll consider any of the other bids," said Kane. Another round of bids may be sought he said, adding that it took a great deal of effort for the last round and only four bids came in. "Mothballing the facility would be one option," said Kane.

Beyond that it's hard to predict what might happen. He said the state wants to see everyone involved with the transaction satisfied, including the local residents. "We wanted to find the best and highest use," he said.

According to Union County Commissioner Preston Boop getting Woodward Camp to take the property is the option local officials intend to pursue.

At one time, Woodward was to take over the property, but that deal ended in a dispute over leaking fuel tanks at the center. Boop feels that Woodward is the only option that would give Union County a chance to draw tourists from all over the world. He says that the best way to do that is to go with the bids as submitted.

"We don't want to see the project re-bid," he said. But first, all parties need to take some time and re-group he said.

He has requested that the Senator Corman with cooperation from Rep. Fairchild try to accommodate a meeting with the commissioners and township supervisors within in the upcoming weeks to try to regroup and create a strategy.

"We've got an opportunity here and you have to take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves. We're going to do whatever we have to," said Boop.