

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

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Upper Peninsula rejects Project Seafarer

It was supposed to be a massive underground grid that would enable the military to communicate with submarines far under the sea in the event of a nuclear attack against the United States. The U.S. Navy needed a way to communicate with its nuclear submarines, which were designed to remain submerged for weeks or months at a time because radio transmissions cannot penetrate seawater. The solution it came up with was an “extremely low frequency” transmitter that could be used to communicate with subs around the world, even if they were deep in the ocean. A section of land in the Upper Peninsula was deemed a suitable site for the enormous transmitter and the government set about plans to construct it. Yoopers, however, wanted to say in the matter. In an advisory election on Nov. 5, 1975, voters in four communities around the U.P. voiced their opposition in margins of up to 8 to 1.

The negative public reaction prompted Governor William G. Milliken to take a stand against the project. The following year he received promises from President Gerald Ford and challenger Jimmy Carter that Michigan could veto the project. After Carter’s victory, Milliken received a letter from the military that the views of Michigan residents would be given “very great weight” in the decision of where to locate the project. That might have been a nice gesture, but it was far from the veto that had been promised. Milliken became a louder opponent to seafarer, which could have made the Upper Peninsula a far different place than it is today.

Initially, it was to involve thousands of miles of cable buried under an area of 1,200 square miles. The project would require construction of more than a thousand miles of 25-foot-wide roads cut through forests in an area up to a quarter of the peninsula.

The billion-dollar project would have brought jobs to the U.P., but there were concerns about what the low frequencies would have meant for plant growth, wildlife and human health.

Backlash over the proposal caused the military to scale back the project, which was renamed Project ELF. It was built in a less disruptive fashion and in a much smaller area in the western U.P. and Wisconsin. It operated between 1985 and 2004.