

Mine-fire dispute burns on in Pa.

By Evan Schuman

Special to The Sun

Centralia, Pa. — It is not easy to pay a visit to Anthony Gaughan. The government has blocked off the small side street he lives on with more than a dozen small red markers. An imposing bright red sign with white lettering greets visitors: "POSTED — KEEP OUT — DANGER."

"That's just to scare people," the retired coal miner says.

But he says it doesn't scare him. Nor did it scare him three years ago when the government tried to buy his property, telling him he lived in a hazardous section of town.

Mr. Gaughan rejected the government's efforts to relocate him because he said he didn't think he was in any danger.

According to an overwhelming vote of borough property owners last month, however, Mr. Gaughan's neighbors disagree with him. They voted, in a non-binding referendum, to move out of the town many of them have called home since they were

born — while letting the federal government pick up the estimated \$50 million tab.

But red tape and tight fiscal policies in Washington are delaying those courtesy exit visas from Uncle Sam for at least a year, while the state and federal governments desperately try to get together on an appropriate method and the estimated cost of relocating the roughly 1,000 residents of this small coal-mining town.

Centralia, plagued by an underground mine fire that has raged beneath the borough since the early 1960s, finds itself caught in the middle of two battles: between authorities in Washington and the state capital at Harrisburg, and between Centralians who demand to be bought out and those who say they will refuse to leave even if ordered to do so.

When the House and Senate reconvene later this month, members of the Pennsylvania congressional delegation — particularly Representative Frank Harrison (whose district includes Centralia) and Senator Arlen Specter — will try to finance a relocation of Centralia residents through, among other means, a special appropriation item on the Department of Interior's budget for next year.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources (DER) has had a team in Centralia interviewing residents and compiling property value figures to determine precisely how much various relocation methods would cost. When those figures are prepared, the exact dollar amount of the congressional requests will be determined, congressional aides say.

The government has two main options. It can either stop the fire at its present stage by digging trenches deep enough to contain the fire or it can try to extinguish it. The second option, according to engineers, would cost about \$600 million and is not considered a feasible alternative in Washington.

The 60-year-old Mr. Gaughan, though, says he doesn't think the government's relocating him is a feasible alternative. "I make \$700 a month in disability," the life-long Centralian said, sitting on the porch of his 10-room ranch house in Southern Centralia. "How in hell am I going to afford a home like this?"

Mr. Gaughan was one of two Centralia residents who received a federal government offer to relocate him in 1981, but he turned it down, saying he did not think he was in any danger.

The government said harmful gases from the raging mine fire would find their way into his house.

Mr. Gaughan, who says he didn't believe government officials, felt that he might not be offered fair market value for his property. It had been government policy not to offer any citizen a dollar amount for property until the citizen agreed to sell.

"There are people who didn't want to move, but they were scared into moving [by the government]," Mr. Gaughan said, expressing a common belief among many of the townspeople.

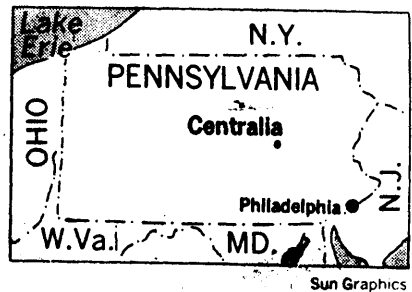
Many residents said government employees warned the citizens — one day before the vote — that if they did not vote to relocate, they might never get another chance, and could lose their homes without any compensation.

Mayor John Wandalowski said there was a lot of misinformation spread around town before the vote, and he said the government was the source of most of it.

"That election was a joke," said Helen Womer, Mr. Gaughan's neighbor, who also turned down the government's offer. She complained of "government scare tactics" and said the residents were confused and needed to trust someone.

The government told residents, "Either live with the fire or get out," Mrs. Womer said.

Mr. Gaughan and Mrs. Womer are the only residents remaining on Centralia's Wood street after 25 of their neighbors accepted the government's 1981 offer to move. Most of their neighbors' property now lies barren, except for some state-of-the-art sci-



entific monitoring equipment placed there by state and federal scientists and an occasional flue vent to relieve pressure from the fire.

The fire burns beneath many sections of Centralia, periodically poking its head through the ground, sending clouds of gray-white smoke over the town from eerie-looking "potholes" on the sides of a few local roads.

The burning coal beneath the town is also undermining many sections of road and ground, causing cave-ins to occur.

Mr. Gaughan said some of the people who relocated took some non-government testing equipment with them as souvenirs. "The people who lived on that corner took one of the devices with them. They wanted to use it as a smoke detector."

There are also people who voted for the buyout and say they desperately want to be relocated by the government.

Joan Girolami counts herself as one of those people.

Mrs. Girolami, a mother of two, says she is angered by the way Washington has been handling the Centralia matter.

The government's "cut-off line went right through my yard and my swimming pool," Mrs. Girolami said in an interview in the back of a crowded borough hall meeting room last week. Several hundred residents had gathered to hear presentations from land developers and borough officials on the latest developments in Centralia.

In 1981, when she found out that the government would not relocate her, she "started crying and thought, How could the government do this to us?" she said.

Mrs. Girolami, 41, said her two daughters weighed heavily in her desire to relocate. She said there was gas in her house that caused headaches so severe for her 19-year-old daughter Lorri that she had to leave home.

The former machine operator said that in 1978 government scientists began actively working on the mine fire but that she did not want to become involved until recently. "I was just a housewife and I didn't feel it was my place to tell engineers what to do.

"I do not trust the federal government," she says. "I've been lied to too many times."

A common concern here is what effect a relocation would have on the area's older residents.

Mayor Wandalowski says he thinks the borough's older residents are the true victims of the mine fire. "These are the people I feel sorry for," he said.

Agnes Owens, 67, another lifelong Centralian, was moved out of her home by the federal government and was placed in a government-owned house trailer three blocks away because the gases in her home had become too concentrated.

"It's pretty comfortable," she says of the trailer, but admits she misses her home. "The only thing I don't have to pay for is rent," Mrs. Owens says with a nervous laugh.

Mrs. Owens says most of the borough's older residents are scared about moving since they have never known any other home. "They're heartbroken and don't want to leave, but they know they have to," she said.

Mrs. Womer said she's glad she turned down the government's buyout offer, quickly adding that some of the people who left now regret having done so.

"Believe me, they are sorry they ever took that offer," she said, referring to the 27 people who sold their homes to the government.