Social Security looking for site for data center

Stimulus package provides funds

5,000 workers could be hired

February 19, 2009|By Paul West | Paul West,paul.west@baltsun.com

Washington -Wanted: Large parcel of real estate suitable for high-security, high-tech databank containing names, earning histories and Social Security numbers of 300 million Americans. Must be within 40 miles of Baltimore.

Using a hefty down payment from the newly signed economic stimulus law, the Social Security Administration has embarked on a $750 million project to replace its outmoded National Computer Center.

The agency received a total of $1 billion in the stimulus, with half to go toward the computer project and half for reducing a huge backlog in processing disability claims.

The injection of funds could result in hiring 5,000 to 6,000 workers in Baltimore and around the country, Michael J. Astrue, the commissioner of the Social Security Administration, said in an interview yesterday.

One thing that won't change, however, is the agency's top leadership.

An appointee of President George W. Bush, Astrue confirmed he has no intention of leaving his position.

Earlier this month, in an ad published in The Baltimore Sun, a labor union representing thousands of Social Security workers, the American Federation of Government Employees, called for "a new direction" at the agency by demanding Astrue's resignation.

"I'm here. I'm enjoying it," he said. "I'm looking forward to serving President Obama."

In 1994, Congress tried to insulate the top job from a change in administrations at the same time that it made Social Security an independent agency. The commissioner cannot be removed except for "neglect of duty or malfeasance."

Astrue, a Republican lawyer with degrees from Yale and Harvard, has a six-year term that expires one day before Barack Obama's term ends.

A little over a year ago, Social Security officials began looking seriously at the need to replace its data center, which is 30 years old and has "outlived its normal life," Astrue said. It is currently projected to run out of storage capacity by late 2012, and the agency is making plans to fill the gap before the new facility is completed, possibly by mid-2014.

Building a new data center "is fairly complicated," he said, with a variety of "cyber-security and other security needs." The $750 million budget for the project includes an estimated $400 million for land and construction and about $350 million for new equipment.