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By SHAWN PIATEK

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U.S. Rep. John Murtha wore a sly grin as he pressed the accelerator of Lockheed Martin's Joint Light Tactical Vehicle prototype on Monday.

The Johnstown Democrat visited JWF Industries at the Lower Works in downtown Johnstown to see a demonstration of the military's next-generation land vehicle.

But he got much more than he anticipated. The Department of Defense is offering a \$10 billion contract to the company that comes up with the winning JLTV model, which will replace the Humvee as the military's primary land vehicle.

JWF is one of Lockheed's main partners on the project.

Murtha didn't just get to observe the vehicle in action, he drove it to and from JWF's facilities to a testing ground the company has constructed in hills above the plant. Murtha said the heavily armored vehicle "drove like an SUV."

Between his time behind the wheel, Murtha and his granddaughter, Anne, rode along as the prototype was taken through its paces on the testing track. He said he was surprised by the way the vehicle handled every obstacle.

"I've been in a lot of military vehicles, and this has the smoothest ride of all of them," Murtha said. "When we went around that tight curve as fast as we were going and we didn't even slide, I was impressed."

"I see a lot of potential for this program to bring jobs here down the road."

The project could mean as many as 1,000 jobs for the Johnstown area if the Lockheed/JWF team is successful.

The first step is to be among the companies that are "downselected" as contract finalists.

Downselection will take place within the next two months.

At least two and as many as three companies will be chosen as finalists. Those companies then will have about two years to refine their designs before the Department of Defense makes its final decision.

Murtha's visit certainly won the Lockheed/JWF team an ally. The congressman, who serves as the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, was highly complimentary of the Lockheed prototype.

"I don't think the other companies are as far along with their vehicles," Murtha said. "They certainly haven't put the kind of money into their prototype that Lockheed has invested.

"I expect Lockheed and JWF will be in the downselect and that the military will someday be buying these vehicles from them."

John Polacek, chief operating officer of JWF Defense Systems, said Murtha's support is appreciated. He said he expected the congressman would be impressed given the amount of time and effort that has been directed to the project.

"Certainly, the congressman's support is very much appreciated," Polacek said.

"But we also have a very good vehicle and one that's very mature.

"We have put more than 2,000 miles of testing in during just the past couple of weeks alone. When you start adding up the total investment we have placed into this project, you can see why we're so confident in this vehicle's future."