

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission

EARLY



BIRD

July 24, 2005

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AUGUSTA - As lawmakers gather for a special session next Friday, discussions are already under way for a post-BRAC special session of the Legislature to deal with the economic impact of the possible closure of Maine bases by the Defense Department's Base Realignment and Closure commission process.

Davlin argues 183rd jet transfer in D.C. (Springfield, IL)

"I can't rule anything in or out right now," Gov. John Baldacci said in an interview. "I am really focused right now on getting a bond package approved next week."

National Guard leaders propose plan to close fewer bases (Reno, NV)

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In several meetings with lawmakers, however, Baldacci has outlined a response to the possible closing of Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Brunswick Naval Air Station and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service center in Limestone that includes a special session soon after BRAC decisions are acted on by President Bush.

Kittery yard in line for \$8 million upgrade (Portland, ME)

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Some of the plans he will discuss publicly, but others, such as a sizable bond issue for economic development, he is unwilling to discuss with the bond package before lawmakers next week.

"We are doing everything we can to prevent a base closure," Baldacci said, "We are hoping for the best, but planning for the worst."

The worst has been called the "perfect economic storm" by University of Southern Maine economist Charles Colgan. He said the loss of more than 12,000 jobs if all three facilities were closed would be a blow to Maine's economy that would take a decade to recover from.

"We can't wait for that," said Sen. Lynn Bromley, D-South Portland. She is the co-chair of the Legislature's Business, Research and Economic Development Committee, a panel that wants a far larger bond than the \$20 million proposed by legislative leaders.

"This is just the first bond," said Rep. Nancy Smith, D-Monmouth. She is co-chair of the panel. "We will have to deal with another bond proposal after the BRAC process is over and we know its impact."

Smith had just emerged from a private meeting with Baldacci, Bromley and the two GOP leaders on the committee. She said there was broad agreement the state would need to significantly invest in its economy to help offset job losses from BRAC.

"I don't think there is any doubt we will have to do more," Sen. Dana Dow, R-Waldoboro, said after the meeting. "But that's not something we are ready to deal with next week."

Not all Republicans agree with the need for larger bond issues next week or after BRAC. House GOP leader David Bowles, R-Sanford, said if bases were closed it would result in lower state revenues and less ability to pay back any additional bonds.

"Do I have to remind people that we just had our bond rating lowered this year?" he asked. "I

don't think we should be incurring more debt if we will have less ability to pay it back."

But, Bowles said, a special session to create development agencies for the areas where bases are closed would have his support.

"If we are talking about creating agencies like the Loring Development Authority and providing some startup funding for them, that's something we should do as soon as we know about the bases," he said.

The Loring Development Authority was created by the Legislature after an earlier BRAC commission voted the Limestone base closed in 1991.

Senate President Beth Edmonds, D-Freeport, said she expects that once the BRAC commission has made its decisions there will be a special session to craft a state response to the economic impact.

"I think the whole state is holding its breath to see what BRAC does," she said. "If the worst happens, we have to be ready to create the impetus for new jobs and economic development."

Edmonds said a bond for investment in the state's economy likely would be a part of that response. She said the state must respond swiftly to mitigate any job losses from BRAC.

"I want to make investments in jobs that are going to move the state forward," she said. "We can't hold back and just wait and see what happens."

In addition to legislative action, the state is working with local groups to plan both short-term and long-term responses to any closings, the governor said. Federal grants will be available to help plan reuse of facilities and develop them for civilian uses.

"We have preliminary approval for a grant of about a million dollars to the Department of Labor to help workers affected," he said.

The grant, a joint project with New Hampshire, will provide funds for a wide array of planning efforts to handle increased layoffs in areas on the BRAC list. Money is also available to plan for what additional educational resources may be needed to train workers for new occupations.

Collins: Now is a bad time for round of base closures

Portsmouth Herald News
July 24, 2005

BATH, Maine - Maine Sen. Susan Collins said Saturday that she doesn't know whether she and colleagues will succeed in delaying the latest round of base closings.

But Collins, R-Maine, said it's important to continue to raise the issue of whether now is the appropriate time to be closing bases as the nation remains at war and soldiers continue to be stationed overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On Friday, the Bush administration threatened to veto a sweeping defense bill if lawmakers try to delay the latest round of military base closures.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune's proposal would require the Pentagon to await the return of troops before a base-closing plan becomes final. It has the support of Republicans and Democrats from Maine, Connecticut, New Jersey and New Mexico.

Collins said she hopes President Bush will reconsider his stance.

"I hope he'll look at what we're trying to do. We're not saying it's inappropriate to close bases. We're just saying it's the wrong time," she said.

At her urging, Collins said Thune modified the amendment to let the base closing commission complete its work and make final recommendations.

The commission's recommendations would be put on hold until after troops return and the Pentagon completes its next quadrennial review.

Collins noted that there are emerging threats, like China, which is building up its Navy.

She said the Pentagon wants to close Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine, but it has not decided how many submarines are needed in the future.

"There are too many uncertainties" to proceed base closings, Collins said after christening the Farragut, a Navy destroyer, at Bath Iron Works.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld released his sweeping proposal in May to close or shrink 62 major domestic bases and hundreds of smaller installations.

In Maine, the Pentagon proposed either closing or scaling back the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, the Brunswick Naval Air Station and the Defense Finance Accounting Service center in Limestone.

The Base Realignment and Closure Commission must send its own list of recommendations to the president by September for his approval. It then goes to Congress, which must accept it or reject it in its entirety.

Local News Articles

Former Brass: Protect Pope

Fayetteville Observer (Fayetteville, NC)
Henry Cuningham
July 24, 2005

Fort Bragg can still get its paratroopers in the air if no C-130s are stationed at Pope Air Force Base, but former Army and Air Force commanders say performance will suffer.

Retired Col. Daniel E. "Stump" Sowada commanded Pope's 317th Tactical Airlift Wing during the Panama invasion in 1989. He is now city administrator of West Lake Hills, Texas.

"Certainly they can operate without a permanent Air Force presence there, but the teamwork that is built up - not just by the permanent presence but by the familiarity with the people you are dealing with - goes a long way," Sowada said.

At a hearing in Washington on Tuesday, Mike Flinn, an analyst for the Base Closure and Realignment Commission, suggested that the commission consider removing all permanent airplanes from Pope.

The original recommendation from the Pentagon was to move the 43rd Wing C-130s from Pope and turn the base over to the Army, but to station 16 C-130s from reserve units at the airstrip.

Flinn said the 16 C-130s would not be enough to meet the Army's needs anyway, requiring that planes be brought in to bolster training.

'Clean slate'

The base closure commission is still considering what to do with Pope. At Tuesday's hearing, it voted to take a closer look at the Pentagon proposal.

"The commission staff told us as far as they are concerned the slate is clean on Pope," retired Brig. Gen. Paul Dordal said.

Dordal, a former wing commander at Pope, is working with the Cumberland County Business Council to persuade the BRAC commissioners to keep Pope open as an Air Force base and preserve the C-130 wing.

Dordal and a former commander of Fort Bragg's 82nd Airborne Division echo Sowada's contention that keeping planes stationed at Pope makes for better teamwork between the paratroopers and those who transport them. That teamwork is important when the country needs to get paratroopers to trouble spots quickly.

"If you don't work together and train together on a daily basis, then when it comes to combat operations you haven't developed the relationships or the procedures or techniques required to make the operation a success," Dordal said.

Retired Lt. Gen. George A. Crocker commanded the 82nd Airborne Division from 1994 to 1996.

"The more you keep an Army-Air Force team together, the better they get at it," he said. He lives in his native Arkansas and has done military consulting in Iraq.

"I wouldn't see any justification for just turning it over to the Army," Sowada said. "I certainly think that the response time is going to be enhanced by a permanent presence. Part of the response time is the planning. If you have sat down and worked and planned and executed training missions on a day-to-day basis in a joint effort, I think that would certainly be effective when the balloon goes up for real."

Timetable

Retired Adm. Harold Gehman and retired Gen. James T. Hill, two of nine members of the Base Closure and Realignment Commission, will visit Pope on Aug. 2.

Five commissioners will be at a public hearing in Washington on Aug. 10. The full commission will start making final decisions during the week of Aug. 22. The commission, which is the only body that can change the proposal, must report to the president by Sept. 8. The president and Congress can only accept or reject the entire package.

Dordal said the BRAC analysts will assess how many flights are required to get the job done for Fort Bragg, options for providing the service and cost-effectiveness of various options.

Cumberland County officials say it would be most effective and efficient to keep the present arrangement in place. The 43rd Wing has about 25 C-130s.

Dordal says the Army does not have the specially trained personnel to operate an Air Force runway, such as firefighters trained to respond to aircraft fires, munitions handlers to load Air Force aircraft and fuel management specialists.

"It would be all new and have to be built by the Army," Dordal said. "It really doesn't make much sense when you look at the roles and

missions of the services for the Army to try to run an Air Force base.

BRAC analysts say the Army operates large strategic airfields - Biggs Field at Fort Bliss, Texas, and Gray Field at Fort Hood, Texas.

Dordal says the Army airfields have long runways but are not manned for the short-notice surge operations associated with Fort Bragg's rapid deployment operations.

Proposal To Expand Fort Bliss May Turn The Tide In El Paso

The city sees a chance to boost its economy and add jobs, homes, schools and roads

Houston Chronicle (Houston, TX)

Alicia A. Caldwell

July 24, 2005

EL PASO - For years, El Paso has taken it on the chin.

Less-than-scientific studies and magazine articles have ranked El Paso among the dumbest, fattest, even sweatiest cities in America. Worse, El Paso has lost a number of big industries, including blue-jeans makers and an energy company.

But El Paso's fortunes may be changing, thanks to a Pentagon recommendation that could double the number of troops at nearby Fort Bliss and bring more high-paying jobs and perhaps an economic resurgence to this city of 560,000 along the Mexican border.

Hundreds of business owners have swamped Chamber of Commerce meetings to learn how to become federal contractors if President Bush approves the realignment.

The move could mean a wealth of contracts to build houses, roads, schools and other infrastructure.

"This could be the beginning of a real renaissance for El Paso," City Councilman Beto O'Rourke said.

Under the Pentagon proposal, Army troops based in Germany and South Korea would be brought home and stationed at Fort Bliss.

Housing market may boom

With the Army able to house only about 40 percent of its 12,000 personnel now stationed at the 1.1 million-acre post, the El Paso housing market could see a huge expansion.

Construction as a result of the expansion of Fort Bliss is expected to add as much as \$2 billion to the region's economy in the next four years, said Richard Dayoub, president of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce.

The median household income in El Paso is about \$32,000, and most of the jobs are in minimum-wage service or manufacturing. As of May, the unemployment rate was 7.3 percent, well more than the national rate.

Though the expansion could be a boon to the city's economy, it could also bring problems — namely, traffic jams and crowded classrooms.

Mayor John Cook, who took office in June, said the city's three school districts, with a total of more than 142,000 students, are already "bursting at the seams" and have set their sights on expanding, renovating and building new schools.

Funds for roads

As for new roads, Gov. Rick Perry has already pledged about \$16 million in state funds for an overpass to provide better access from Fort Bliss to adjacent Briggs Field.

The first test for the city will come this summer, when nearly 4,000 soldiers are scheduled to arrive as part of the expansion.

Bliss spokeswoman Jean Offutt said the post's importance to the region's economy was recognized in another round of base closings in 1995, when the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and its nearly 6,000 soldiers were moved to Fort Carson, Colo.

"I think the community kind of realized that if they were not real active in supporting their post, who knows what the future might hold?" Offutt said.

Defense Research Facility Pursued

Portland Press Herald (Portland, ME)

Elbert Aull

July 23, 2005

SANFORD — A state senator is trying to raise public money for a defense research facility near Sanford's airport that he says will help boost southern Maine's economy if Portsmouth Naval Shipyard closes. Sen. Jon Courtney, R-Sanford, asked legislators this week to earmark \$500,000 of an upcoming state borrowing package to start a consortium that would develop the next generation of unmanned military vehicles.

The consortium would be based in Sanford and anchored by Applied Thermal Sciences, an engineering research and development firm with defense-contracting experience, but could include companies from throughout the state, officials said.

Legislators tentatively agreed on an \$83 million bond package last week. The proposal, which will reach voters in November if it is approved by two-thirds of the Legislature, includes \$20 million for job creation projects, most of which would fund biomedical and marine research.

Courtney said he made his request because there is nothing in the borrowing plan to help offset the possible closure of the shipyard in Kittery. Sanford is home to the largest group of Portsmouth Naval Shipyard employees in Maine or New Hampshire - around 400 workers.

"I'm not gonna sit around and wait to get hit," Courtney said Friday.

Supporters of the consortium project said Maine would be an ideal place for a Department of Defense unmanned vehicles laboratory.

Unmanned vehicles are operated from remote locations. The military is already using unmanned aircraft in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Several prominent politicians, including President Bush and Sen. John Warner, R-Virginia, have said the military needs more unmanned vehicles, particularly aircraft.

The Department of Defense plans to spend about \$18 billion over the next several years to develop the technology, said Les Stevens, Sanford's economic affairs director.

Stevens said he has been working with Applied Thermal Sciences for months to get state funding for the project. He said the consortium's headquarters would be built near the town's airport on Route 109.

The project would need around \$4 million in seed money over the next few years. Stevens said officials originally planned to ask for all of the money in next year's bonding package, but they felt the possibility of the shipyard closing warranted immediate action.

"I think the \$500,000 that Jon (Courtney) is talking about can get our toe in the water," he said.

Stevens said state financial support would make the consortium attractive to federal defense officials, which could produce federal contracts.

"The real money is going to come from the Department of Defense," he said.

Bases in Texas and North Dakota that are threatened by the base-closing process are already pursuing similar technology to offset the effects of closure.

Sanford officials said the consortium would spark spinoff industry that will further absorb shipyard losses if the facility is closed.

"Throughout the nation, wherever a federal laboratory is developed, industry just springs," said Bob Carr, a project manager at Applied Thermal Sciences.

Carr said Maine's boatbuilding industry could give the state an edge in winning federal contracts to develop unmanned vehicle technology. Much of the composite materials used to build boats are also used in unmanned vehicles, he said.

Maine also has several flight corridors that were established for Tomahawk Cruise missile development, Carr said. Supporters say those corridors could be used for unmanned aircraft testing.

House Speaker John Richardson, D-Brunswick, said he would support Courtney's proposal as long as it was added to the \$83 million package. Courtney, however, said the funds could be diverted from proposed bike and trail improvements that are included in the current bond proposal.

Discussion of the borrowing package is expected to continue next week.

Davlin argues 183rd jet transfer in D.C.
Springfield State Journal Register (Springfield, IL)

Yuliya Horbach
July 23, 2005

WASHINGTON - Springfield Mayor Tim Davlin met with staff members of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission here Friday to continue lobbying against the Pentagon's proposed transfer of the 183rd Fighter Wing's 15 F-16s to a base in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Accompanied by four other delegates, including Eric Frankl, director of Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport, Davlin presented the final draft of the city's arguments against the move of the Air National Guard unit.

"The main thing we talked about was the fact that the 183rd needs to be looked at individually," Davlin said afterward. "If you look at us individually, you see that there is no cost savings."

In what he called a congenial and open meeting with a commission aide, Davlin said he and the others laid out the numbers that indicate no savings in moving the Springfield-based aircraft.

"I think that raised an eyebrow or two," he said.

Because the cost of employees is higher in Fort Wayne than in Springfield, it would cost an additional \$2,537 in wages a year if the base were realigned, the city's report contends.

According to Davlin, the Pentagon's arguments for realigning the base are the need to consolidate its fighter force and a perceived recruiting advantage at Fort Wayne.

In the commission's meeting last week, its members expressed deep concern about the proposed Air Guard changes, including aggravating a difficult recruiting challenge and weakening homeland security in the areas that would lose aircraft.

Those two issues also were the talking point of the Springfield delegation's presentation Friday. They rejected the idea that realignment could improve recruiting, noting that 99.27 percent of the authorized positions at the 183rd are filled.

"The 183rd is uniquely suited to perform homeland security functions," said the city's report, pointing out that Springfield is close to several major metropolitan areas and is important for the protection of 28 locks and dams and 11 nuclear power plants in Illinois.

The city's delegation also argued that realignment of the 183rd would result in losing almost 600 full- and part-time positions, in addition to the "loss of business opportunities, local marketing power and tourism income."

The Pentagon says the move would affect 163 military and civilian positions.

"I think if they read the criteria and seriously take a look at everything we gave them today, they will see that the recommendations substantially deviated from what the BRAC

Commission is supposed to be doing today," said Davlin, who remains optimistic about getting Springfield off the list for base realignments.

The mayor also presented a copy of the lawsuit filed Thursday by Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan and Gov. Rod Blagojevich, in which the court is asked to block realignment of the Springfield base. The federal law cited in the suit says that to relocate a National Guard unit, the Department of Defense has to obtain the approval of the governor affected by that action.

Blagojevich has not given his approval and says he will not.

"We may win this in the courtroom, as opposed to on Capitol Hill or the Pentagon," Davlin said.

National Guard leaders propose plan to close fewer bases

Reno air guard base on closure list

Reno Gazette Journal (Reno, NV)

Ana Radelat

July 23, 2005

WASHINGTON — State National Guard leaders trying to save dozens of Air National Guard units from closing or losing planes met Friday to craft an alternative plan expected to affect fewer bases.

The nation's adjutants general — the commanders of the National Guard in every state — will give the Base Realignment and Closure Commission their plan early next week, said Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke of Nebraska, president of Adjutants General Association of the United States.

"The commission asked us to provide an alternative to the Air Force plans and we will honor that request in the days ahead," Lempke said.

The commission has recommended closing the Nevada Air National Guard base at Reno-Tahoe International Airport and transferring the eight C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft from the 152nd

Airlift Wing to other units in other states. The nine-member commission has until Sept. 8 to send a final base-closing list to President Bush.

The effort to derail the Pentagon's recommendation to move aircraft or shut down 29 Air National Guard units is gaining momentum from the political firestorm the Pentagon's plan ignited among state officials, members of Congress and the politically powerful National Guard Association.

Lempke said the adjutants general would "fine-tune" the proposal over the weekend. It was drafted in response to requests from members of the commission who asked the adjutants for help in considering an alternative to the Pentagon's proposal.

Unlike the Pentagon's plans for the Air National Guard, the adjutants' recommendations do not single out any air guard units for mission realignment, Lempke said. He declined to disclose many details of the proposal, but said it probably would include one of the Pentagon's suggestions — that aging Air Guard planes should be retired.

The Pentagon said overhaul of the Air National Guard is needed to strengthen homeland security in vulnerable communities and boost the Air Force's fighting ability.

But political opposition to the Pentagon's air guard plan was sparked the day it was disclosed as part of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's base closing and realignment recommendations May 13.

Opponents say the plan leaves many governors with less military help during emergencies and would hurt the National Guard's ability to recruit and retain members.

Officials in Pennsylvania and Illinois have sued Rumsfeld over the proposal, saying the move would violate federal law that places the National Guard under state authority until a unit is called up for active duty. A lawyer for the base closing commission also said the move would violate the law.

July 23, 2005

On Wednesday, key members of the House Armed Services Committee blasted the plan.

“I think the Air Force runs a real risk of damaging the historically good relations it has enjoyed with its reserve partners,” said U.S. Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo.

The base closing commissioners also have been critical.

At a hearing this week on some of the Pentagon’s proposals, retired Admiral Harold Gehman and other commissioners stepped up criticism of the Air National Guard proposal.

Gehman accused the Air Force of “substantially deviating” from the laws governing the base realignment process and of making errors in assessing the military value of those units.

A finding that the Pentagon has “substantially deviated” from its base closing criteria in making a recommendation would allow the panel to strike it from the commissioner’s final base closure list.

“What we’ve been hearing from the commissioners certainly makes us hopeful,” said John Goheen, spokesman for the National Guard Association.

Also this week, commission Chairman Anthony Principi said the Air Force was “creating a long-term problem” in recruiting by taking aircraft and missions away from local units.

But Principi said rejecting all of the Pentagon’s recommendations “would be irresponsible” and urged Pentagon officials to work with governors and the adjutants general to develop “a solution that serves the best interests of national security and the country.”

Defending Miss. bases State leaders tell panel why they should not be closed

Jackson Clarion Ledger (Jackson, MS)
John Fuquay

NEW ORLEANS — State leaders and community representatives told members of a federal commission Friday that plans to close four Mississippi military installations are based on inaccurate data and would endanger infrastructure critical to the nation's commerce and defense.

They said closing Pascagoula's Naval Station along with one in Ingleside, Texas, would leave the Gulf of Mexico and its huge volume of commercial ship cargo unprotected.

They also said shutting down a hospital at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi would compromise health care for active military personnel, veterans and their families and create a burden for other medical facilities.

The Pentagon in May recommended a massive military reorganization to take place across the country. Since then, state and community leaders have challenged the plan that would cost Mississippi 1,678 jobs. President Bush must make a final recommendation to Congress this fall.

Lt. Gov. Amy Tuck said officials do not contest three recommendations that would realign military forces by moving them from Mississippi to other states. But she said four recommendations should be reconsidered.

"It is hard to imagine no naval station in the Gulf," Tuck said. Closing the base would eliminate about 1,000 military and civilian jobs.

Jim Brooks, a community representative who is retired from Northrop Grumman Ship Systems, said, the military's "recommendation abandons the Gulf of Mexico and leaves a huge national security and homeland defense gap."

"This infrastructure is critical to this nation's economy, commerce, trade, defense and well-being," Brooks said. He added that the Gulf's assets are "potentially in the crosshairs of those who may mean or wish to do us harm."

Fourth District U.S. Rep. Gene Taylor said 63 percent of the nation's commercial ships pass through the Gulf, and the Gulf accounts for 35 percent of the nation's coastline. The Gulf also has 25 percent of the country's oil production, 30 percent of the nation's gas production, numerous refineries, chemical plants and fisheries.

Taylor was especially critical of the decision to close the hospital at Keesler, noting a member of his staff discovered a Defense Department miscalculation in the facility's ranking.

"The DOD made an inexcusable error," Taylor said. "Essentially, the DOD has proposed to close the Keesler hospital, cripple its graduate medical education programs and force military personnel, their families and retirees off-base where there is a severe shortage of physicians, all because somebody at the Pentagon punched the wrong key on his computer."

He said Keesler should have been graded 11.25 of a possible 12 for the physical condition of its facility. Instead, it received a zero. The closing would transfer 402 jobs out of Mississippi.

Taylor said the military acknowledged the error, but it remained uncertain whether the higher score would change the recommendation. Three of the nine commissioners of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission heard the testimony Friday. They did not respond to arguments made in the presentations.

However, retired Army Gen. James T. Hill said of the Keesler ranking, "We will look at the value. We will run an analysis and ask the Air Force to do the same."

After the hearing, Den Knecht of Meridian, said, "I was very pleased Commissioner Hill made that remark."

Officials representing the Air National Guard unit in Meridian spoke against plans to close that facility.

They said losing the 186th Refueling Wing at Key Field would leave in-flight refueling capabilities over portion of Southeast United

States poorly covered while sections of the Northeast and Midwest would have overlapping coverage.

Third District U.S. Rep. Chip Pickering said the Pentagon is reviewing its legal authority to close National Guard units, which are under state control. The closure would eliminate 175 jobs.

A Navy human resource center at the Stennis Space Center in Hancock County also is slated for closure with those duties and 148 jobs realigned with a similar office in Pennsylvania.

Tuck said officials do not dispute plans to close an Army ammunition plant in Hancock County with 54 jobs, an Army Reserve center in Vicksburg with 28 jobs and a realignment of a unit at the Naval Air Station in Meridian that will cost 16 jobs. The Columbus Air Force Base will gain 107 jobs, and one position will be added to an Air Guard station in Jackson.

After the hearing, Meridian Mayor John Robert Smith said he believed the presentations were productive. "I saw heads nodding, and they were beginning to ask questions of one another," Smith said of the commissioners.

The Pentagon projects \$50 billion in savings over the next 20 years. Bases would be closed over the next six years.

Kittery yard in line for \$8 million upgrade

Portland Press Herald (Portland, ME)
July 24, 2005

KITTERY — The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is in line to get \$8.1 million for a new acoustic testing facility despite the yard's presence on a list of facilities proposed for closure.

New Hampshire Sens. Judd Gregg and John Sununu say money is included in the 2006 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs bill to upgrade the acoustic testing and calibration services at the yard.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved the bill. The full House and Senate have yet to vote on the expenditures.

"It's encouraging," former shipyard commander Bill McDonough, head of Save Our Shipyard, told The Portsmouth (N.H.) Herald. But McDonough said he did not believe it would be deciding factor when commissioners consider whether to remove the shipyard from the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Commission list.

The federal money would go to build a new facility to test and certify acoustic equipment used by Coast Guard and Navy ships and submarines.

"The only acoustic testing and calibration facility currently at the shipyard is the only one being used by the Navy to certify submarine acoustic equipment," Gregg said. "However, the shipyard will now be able to construct a new facility and continue to serve the Navy with the highest level of service found at any of our nation's shipyards."

Also included in the proposed legislation is \$10.4 million to move the New Hampshire Air Guard Headquarters from the former Pease Air Force Base in Newington to a new facility in Concord, where it would be closer to the office of the adjutant general.

"The National Guard Joint Forces are far too spread out and, in many cases, using buildings and office space inadequate for its needs," Gregg said. "And with the excellent news that New Hampshire has been awarded a Civil Support Team, the completion of a comprehensive facility where the joint forces can work under one roof is great news, and will lead to greater efficiency and coordination."

Opinions/ Editorials

Appointed panels take heat for politicians

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (St. Paul, MN)

Edward Lotterman

July 24, 2005

It is a wonder that Osama bin Laden is not occupying the Oval Office. Defense Department officials are some of the most stupid, inept people on the planet.

Or so you might conclude from listening to politicians describe recent base-closing recommendations. Senators and representatives are shocked and outraged by the gross incompetence manifest in the idea of closing South Dakota's Ellsworth Air Force Base or any other of the 62 major facilities on the list.

But that conclusion would be false. While defense officials are not infallible, we remain unconquered and safe. The commanders weighing the military effects of closings are competent. They understand threats to the nation and the resources needed to protect against them.

The exaggerated rhetoric used by members of Congress from affected states reflects political fears, not substantive issues. Despite the fact that past base closings generally did save money without harming affected communities as feared, lawmakers believe that acquiescing to base closings is political suicide.

The base-closing brouhaha is an example of a broader set of challenges that democracies face. How do you structure government to make necessary decisions that are politically unpalatable?

One option is to create a nonelected, ongoing body to absorb political heat. The Base Realignment and Closing Commission (BRAC) is just such a body. The Federal Open Market Committee is another. Both make decisions that Congress prefers not to make, because initial public reactions to base closings or higher interest rates often are highly inflamed.

The blue-ribbon commission or task force is another. President Reagan named the "Greenspan Commission" to examine restructuring Social Security in the early 1980s and President George W. Bush named a new commission to revisit the same issues soon after his inauguration.

The Federal Reserve functions well as a scapegoat, as does the BRAC, despite the heated rhetoric whenever closings are proposed. Could we tackle other thorny problems with similar nonelected bodies?

One obvious move would be to appoint an impartial body to rule on budget issues and absorb resulting political fallout. The last two Minnesota legislatures struggled with budget deficits. Both resorted to accounting gimmicks to close projected gaps. An independent fiscal accounting commission might be a salutary move to deliver the legislature from temptation. It could determine which deficit closing measures are legitimate and which are shams.

A similar national body might remove much flimflam from federal budgeting. Are we really protecting Social Security funds or using them to mask current deficits? Will tax revenues or spending change as projected?

Useful as such insulating bodies may be, they do obscure a fundamental problem. Elected officials feel the political risks of taking necessary but unpopular actions are unacceptable. What in our system of campaigns and elections makes them so gun-shy?

BRAC needs independence

Birmingham News (Birmingham, AL)
July 24, 2005

The nine-member Base Realignment and Closure Commission is supposed to be completely independent. That's the setup. That's what allows the process to work with as little political interference as is likely in what is, without a doubt, a political process.

The Defense Department (i.e., the Bush administration) makes recommendations for military base closings and adjustments. The members of the closure commission spend a few months considering those recommendations and then suggest changes, if they so choose. After that, the final list is sent to President Bush, who either says yes or no. If it's yes, the list goes to

Congress, which must approve or not. Neither the president nor Congress can change the commission's recommendations.

The president already has a lot of clout in the process. BRAC members start with a list from the administration, and one of the last steps requires the president's stamp of approval.

In past years, the closure commission changed few recommendations. This year may be different. Let's hope it is, and not simply for Birmingham's sake.

The Pentagon is pressuring the closure and realignment commission not to change any recommendations. That's wrong, on at least two levels.

The Defense Department has no business trying to pressure the closure commission toward any particular result once it has made its suggestions. That's exactly the political interference the independent process is designed to prevent.

A more important consideration is that the members of the closure commission are trying to make decisions in the best interest of national security. As much as we'd like to think differently, the Pentagon doesn't always operate with that goal where base closings are concerned. Many times, political considerations get more weight than they should.

That's likely what happened when the Pentagon made the suggestion that Birmingham's Air National Guard refueling wing should be dismantled and moved to other bases. The 117th Air Refueling Wing in Birmingham ranked higher based on objective criteria than six other Guard tanker wings nationwide that will remain where they are.

Other Air National Guard wings around the nation have similar arguments.

BRAC members are reconsidering the Air National Guard arguments, which is their right and, evidence shows, exactly what they should be doing. Birmingham's 117th is important to

national security, according to the Defense Department.

Pentagon officials might not want their realignment and closure list tampered with, but that's what this independent commission should do if it's in the national interest of the United States.

Additional Notes