

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission

EARLY



BIRD

August 1, 2005

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BRAC Panelists Awash In Paper

San Antonio Express-News

Sig Christenson

August 1, 2005

As this year's base closure round hits the homestretch, Sue Ellen Turner is getting neck-deep in reading material.

A retired Air Force one-star general, she's one of nine travel-weary members of the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission.

They've jetted around the country the past two months scrutinizing bases and grappling with complex issues that have profound ramifications for scores of communities.

"It's a big task," said Turner, 63, of San Antonio, adding that the job is as tough as anything she's ever done. "There are a lot of different considerations."

The commission has added eight installations to a closure list that already had 33 bases, a decision that's triggered even more travel, regional hearings and research for the BRAC staff of 90. The panel's whirlwind tour of bases in the crosshairs continued this past weekend, when retired Rep. James H. Bilbray, a Nevada Democrat, visited a base in Alaska.

Site visits and meetings with those communities will end Aug. 12. A vote on the fate of three Texas bases on the closure chopping block —

one of them Brooks City-Base — is only weeks away, and well before then the commissioners will have to pore over thick notebooks and reports filed by communities on the hit list.

Overtime, fear, frequent-flyer miles and anxiety come with the turf for Turner and her fellow commissioners. Every community on the list has reason to see them as the cavalry or the Grim Reaper, all-powerful beings who can wipe out thousands of jobs or save them just in the nick of time by casting a "yea" or "nay" vote.

Towns with installations up for closure consideration have talked up the value of their bases, talked down rivals and outlined the dire consequences of closure. They poured into San Antonio's regional hearing last month by the thousands, wearing colorful T-shirts and carrying placards and miniature U.S. flags.

"I think people have been genuinely happy to see us there because the BRAC commission essentially is the only group that can help them at this point," Turner said.

Nobody is giving up in Texas. San Antonio is providing data to support its proposal to keep parts of Brooks that have ties to military medicine and technology. Red River Army Depot in Texarkana welcomed its fourth BRAC commissioner, Bilbray, and Ingleside Naval Station boosters last week pumped \$370,000 into a quick-strike research project that aims to promote South Texas installations as a new home for naval aviator training. They'll submit a report by Aug. 10.

That action came after the commission added the Navy's master jet base at Oceana, Va., to the list, with retired Army Gen. Tom Hill suggesting its jets could be moved to Kingsville Naval Air Station and an aircraft carrier placed in Ingleside.

Oceana was put on the list because of development that prevents young aviators from receiving realistic training, including tricky night carrier landings.

"It was huge," former Corpus Christi Mayor Loyd Neal said of Hill's two-day tour of the region, which came before the commission added Oceana to the BRAC list July 19. "And obviously it resonated with him, enough to get seven votes."

Red River and Ingleside, which together stand to lose 7,700 jobs, are opposite sides of the same coin. William Ehrie, chief of the state's effort to save bases, said commissioners must decide whether shuttering Red River will hurt the Army's ability to renovate vehicles and weapons systems critical to the war effort.

He said Ingleside is a relatively new facility that could take in part of Oceana's mission, but noted that many other things also factor into the equation.

"You're going to need housing, you're going to need school districts, you're going to need barracks, you're going to need dining halls and medical facilities," Ehrie said. "And sometimes that costs money."

Well aware that the future of those regions hangs in the balance, Turner cast herself as an impartial jurist. In an interview, she sidestepped questions about the Kingsville and Ingleside efforts, saying, "I don't know what they expect from their investment, but obviously they would like for it to go the way they want it to go, but I don't even want to go there."

Turner praised Red River as an "extremely efficient" facility that's helped GIs at war and said the loss of 4,500 jobs there and at a nearby ammunition plant will weigh in her deliberations. But although it's "a significant impact and that does play into it, it's not the overriding issue."

There is no guarantee that any of the bases added to the BRAC list last month will close, and the same is true of installations that made the original Pentagon list, made public May 13. A series of votes later this month will settle the matter, with President Bush and Congress then either approving or rejecting it.

Turner is noncommittal when pressed on how she'll vote. She says Red River's role in repairing vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan has given her pause on the Pentagon's recommendation to close the depot, Texarkana's No. 1 employer and home to the region's best-paying jobs.

Veteran observers such as retired Air Force Brig. Gen. John G. Jernigan, leader of San Antonio's BRAC task force, think repeated visits to a base are a good sign.

The head of Texarkana's effort to save Red River saw a good omen after Bilbray's four-hour tour last week.

"The commissioner seemed to be interested in the workers — not the big-picture work force but the individual workers," Jerry Sparks said. "He asked a couple of questions about unemployment, impact and some other things, so we could tell he was concerned about people, not just numbers."

Turner cautioned that no one should read anything into repeat visits. She demurred when asked about Jernigan's proposal to keep Brooks' School of Aerospace Medicine in San Antonio, along with the base's Air Force Institute for Operational Health and directed-energy laboratory.

The idea, according to local leaders, is to save three key areas of Brooks that have ties to San Antonio's growing medical and technology sectors, rather than the entire base, and use them to benefit forward surgical and air evacuation training — key wartime missions.

Turner, a one-time head nurse at Wilford Hall Medical Center, said she's discussed the subject with Jernigan but begged off when asked if the idea made sense. "I really would rather not comment on it, because I would have to make something up," she said.

Turner insisted she hasn't decided the fate of any base. She pointed to a shelf in her Virginia office full of thick binders containing information on the 20 or so visits she has made

to installations on the list and nine regional hearings she's attended, one in San Antonio.

The binders include data on the bases' missions, charts and analysts' reports, among other things. Turner's been reading since the commission began its work, and typically goes through the notebooks before touring an installation.

"Everything that I've been given is in my office here in Crystal City, and all the notes I've taken in regional meetings are in my office, and so when the time comes to dig in, all those resources are going to be there to help refresh my recollection," Turner said. "It's about as much reading as I care to do for a long time. In fact, I may never read again."

Dole endorses base realignment plan

Kinston Free Press (Kinston, NC)

Sue Book

July 31, 2005

NEW BERN - Efforts to have the Base Realignment Commission seriously consider assigning some of Oceana's planes to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point got endorsement from U.S. Senator Elizabeth Dole Friday in a letter to the BRAC Commission chairman.

The letter stressing the existing capacity of MCAS Cherry Point to handle more aircraft as well as further emphasis on her concern about the Defense Department's recommendations on realignment of Pope Air Force Base and the Army Research Office in Durham, came at about the same time Concerned Citizens Against Jet Noise in Hampton Roads are saying the commission's objectivity on the Oceana matter is already compromised.

A release from CCAJN, a 5,000 strong citizens group that has been outspoken on the Oceana issue for about a decade, said "The so-called independent BRAC Commission has delegated its responsibility and authority to set the agenda for its public hearing on NAS Oceana to Sen. John Warner, the architect of the ill-conceived 1995 BRAC decision that brought 156 F/A-18

Hornet aircraft to NAS Oceana and closed NAS Cecil Field, Fla."

The site visit for the NAS Oceana, added to the closure and realignment list submitted by the DoD by the BRAC Commission, is slated for Monday and the Pope AFB visit for Tuesday with hearings in Washington the following week.

Dole said she talked with BRAC Chairman Anthony Principi and BRAC Commissioner Harold Gehman by phone Thursday evening.

"My belief is that as the commission heads into this final stage of site visits and hearings, we have to make our case at every turn," said Dole.

In her letters Dole stressed that MCAS Cherry Point has the capacity and the community desire to absorb at least four more squadrons in addition to the two squadrons of F/A-18 Super Hornets already scheduled to move to Cherry Point in 2007 to relieve pressure on Oceana.

Allies for Cherry Point's Tomorrow asked the commission at its June 28 hearing in Charlotte for the planes and the outlying landing field for pilot practice.

BRAC commissioners wrap up visits, vote just weeks away

San Antonio Express News (San Antonio, TX)
Sig Christenson
July 31, 2005

Retired Air Force Gen. Sue Ellen Turner slumped in her seat on Southwest Airlines Flight 2099Y on a Friday night in Houston, the last leg of a storm-delayed journey that began on the East Coast, when she was greeted by a reporter.

An involuntary twitch followed, then a muffled reply.

"I was tired," said Turner, a member of the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission. "It took me a half hour to realize it was you."

As this year's closure round hits the home stretch, the work is piling up on Turner, 63, of San Antonio and eight other BRAC commissioners. They've added eight installations to a closure list that already had 33 bases on it, a decision that's triggered even more reading, travel, regional hearings and research for the BRAC staff of 90. The panel's whirlwind tour of bases in the crosshairs continued this past weekend, when retired Rep. James H. Bilbray visited a base in Alaska.

Site visits and meetings with those communities will end Aug. 12. A vote on the fate of three Texas bases on the closure chopping block — one of them Brooks City-Base — is only weeks away, and well before then the commissioners will have to pore over thick notebooks and reports filed by communities on the hit list.

Overtime, fear, frequent flyer miles and high anxiety come with the turf for Turner and her fellow commissioners. Every community on the list has reason to see them as the cavalry or the Grim Reaper, all-powerful beings who can wipe out thousands of jobs or save them just in the nick of time by casting a "yea" or "nea" vote.

These towns have talked up the value of their bases, talked down rivals and outlined the dire consequences of closure. They poured into San Antonio's regional hearing last month by the thousands wearing colorful T-shirts and carrying placards and miniature American flags.

"I think people have been genuinely happy to see us there because the BRAC commission essentially is the only group that can help them at this point," Turner said.

Nobody is giving up in Texas. San Antonio is providing data to support its proposal to keep parts of City-Base that have ties to military medicine and technology. Red River Army Depot in Texarkana welcomed its fourth BRAC commissioner, Bilbray, while Naval Station Ingleside boosters last week pumped \$370,000 into a quick-strike research project that aims to promote South Texas installations as a new home for naval aviator training. They'll submit a report by Aug. 10.

That action came after the commission added Master Jet Base Oceana, Va., to the list, with retired Army Gen. Tom Hill suggesting its jets could be moved to Naval Air Station Kingsville and an aircraft carrier placed in Ingleside. Oceana fell on the list because of development that prevents young aviators from receiving realistic training, including tricky night carrier landings.

"It was huge," former Corpus Christi Mayor Loyd Neal said of Hill's two-day tour of the region, which came before the commission added Oceana to the BRAC list on July 19. "And obviously it resonated with him, enough to get seven votes."

Red River and Ingleside, which together stand to lose 7,700 jobs, are opposite sides the same coin. William Ehrie, chief of the state's effort to save bases, said commissioners must decide whether shuttering Red River will hurt the Army's ability to renovate vehicles and weapons systems that are critical to the war effort. He said Ingleside is a relatively new facility that could take in part of Oceana's mission, but noted that many other things also factor into the equation.

"You're going to need housing, you're going to need school districts, you're going to need barracks, you're going to need dining halls and medical facilities," said Ehrie. "And sometimes that costs money."

Well aware that the future of those regions hangs in the balance, Turner cast herself as an impartial jurist in a lengthy interview with the San Antonio Express-News. Though in a prior interview with the paper she lambasted "the obscene amount of dollars" spent by cities trying to stay off the BRAC list, Turner sidestepped questions about the South Texas effort, saying, "I don't know what they expect from their investment, but obviously they would like for it to go the way they want it to go, but I don't even want to go there."

Turner praised Red River as an "extremely efficient" facility that's helped GIs at war, and said the loss of 4,500 jobs there and at a nearby

ammunition plant will weigh in her deliberations. But while it's "a significant impact and that does play into it, it's not the overriding issue," she added.

There is no guarantee that any of the bases added to the BRAC list last month will close, and the same is true of installations that made the original Pentagon list that was made public May 13. A series of votes later this month will settle the matter, with President Bush and Congress then either approving or rejecting it.

Soft spoken and, perhaps, the commission's quietest member, Turner does her best to wear a poker face when pressed on anything that might indicate how she'll vote. She'll tell you Red River's role in repairing vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan has given her pause on the Pentagon's recommendation to close the depot, Texarkana's No. 1 employer and home to the region's best-paying jobs. There's also a chance she'll visit South Texas to better understand the missions there, but Turner leaves it at that.

Veteran observers like retired Air Force Brig. Gen. John G. Jernigan, leader of San Antonio's BRAC task force, think repeated visits to a base are a good sign. One expert close to the BRAC process agreed, and suggested some of the commissioners doubt Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's reasoning for ordering Red River closed.

The head of Texarkana's effort to save Red River saw a good omen after Bilbray's four-hour tour last week. "The commissioner seemed to be interested in the workers — not the big picture work force but the individual workers," Jerry Sparks said. "He asked a couple of questions about unemployment, impact and some other things, so we could tell he was concerned about people, not just numbers."

Turner cautioned that no one should read anything into repeat visits. She pushed back when asked about Jernigan's proposal to keep Brooks' School of Aerospace Medicine in the Alamo City, along with the base's Air Force Institute for Operational Health and directed-energy laboratory.

The idea is to save three key areas of Brooks that have ties to San Antonio's growing medical and technology sectors, rather than the entire base, and use them to benefit forward surgical and air evacuation training — key wartime missions.

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The binders include data on the base's missions, charts and analysts' reports, among other things. Turner's been reading since the commission began its work, and typically goes through the notebooks before touring an installation. There will be much more reading before a final vote on the base.

"Everything that I've been given is in my office here in Crystal City, and all the notes I've taken in regional meetings are in my office, and so when the time comes to dig in, all those resources are going to be there to help refresh my recollection," Turner said.

"It's about as much reading as I care to do for a long time. In fact, I may never read again."

Local News Articles

Bases Aren't Easily Shut Down

The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA)

Dale Eisman

August 1, 2005

WASHINGTON — Closing a major military base like Oceana Naval Air Station would be a mammoth undertaking, costing hundreds of

millions of dollars and requiring thousands of carefully choreographed moves by the Navy, civilian contractors and government officials, according to those who have gone through it.

"It's like moving Disney World – Orlando to Dallas, while keeping the Orlando rides going," said John Leenhouts, a retired Navy captain who helped bring dozens of F/A-18 Hornets – plus pilots, crews, families and even pets – from Cecil Field, Fla., to Oceana in the late 1990s.

Aviators and crews are not allowed a break from overseas missions and deployments while they relocate at home, he said.

Leenhouts said the Cecil-to-Oceana transfer required months of careful planning, not unlike that of a Navy air wing for a major strike against a critical wartime target. If the Navy leaves the Virginia Beach site, local officials would face a different but equally complex set of challenges in trying to move in, said Herb Smetheram, a Florida-based consultant to communities dealing with military base redevelopment.

For starters, the city would need to develop a detailed re-use plan for the property and get it approved by the Pentagon. Provisions must be made for the homeless – federal law gives organizations representing the homeless priority in claiming surplus federal land for their benefit – and there may be claims on part of the property from American Indian s, he said.

"You have to have a lot of expertise on the local redevelopment authority," Smetheram said, as well as cooperation from local and state elected officials and members of Congress. And at Oceana, "you have to have people who understand the aviation industry" because aviation probably would be part of any re development plan.

The 2005 Defense Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission is to decide Oceana's fate by late August. The panel voted July 19 to put the Virginia Beach base on a list of potential targets for closure; four commissioners are to visit Oceana on Monday and take an aerial tour of the surrounding area,

where subdivisions and shopping centers have sprung up on sites the Navy says are at risk for crashes.

The commission next holds a public hearing about Oceana on Thursday in Washington. No date has been set for a decision on Oceana.

The base was added to a list of about three dozen endangered installations despite testimony from Navy and Pentagon officials who said they have been unable to find a reasonable alternative location.

The Defense Department disclosed July 1 that it wishes to replace Oceana with a new master jet base, built “from the ground up,” but thought that job could not be completed in the six-year “window” for BRAC Commission actions.

“Nowadays, trying to build a new airfield – military or private – that takes ages,” Smetheram said. Environmental challenges alone “will tie it up for four years,” he said.

Until an alternative site is identified, several authorities agreed last week, it is all but impossible to predict how quickly an Oceana closing might proceed or how much it might cost.

And if Oceana is realigned rather than closed – that is, gets a new mission and new tenants – a new level of complexity is added to the calculations, they said.

“It’s not like you’re going to wake up one morning and see trucks starting to move off,” said Tim Ford, executive director of the National Association of Installation Developers, a group that assists communities in redeveloping base properties.

Ford said that once the BRAC Commission makes final decisions and its recommendations become law, teams from each service branch will establish timetables for closing and realigning affected bases.

The Defense Department seems focused on completing moves in this BRAC round as

quickly as possible, Ford said, probably to minimize expenses and hasten the arrival of the payback year – the time when the money saved by not having to maintain a base exceeds the costs of closing it down.

“It’s a good goal, but generally, nothing goes exactly as planned,” he said.

As part of its preparation for every closing round, the Pentagon uses a computer model, dubbed COBRA, to estimate the cost of potential moves. A COBRA analysis of closing Oceana and moving its aircraft to Moody Air Force Base in Georgia, a scenario that drew early attention from the BRAC Commission, indicated that the shift would cost \$791 million by 2011 and that the payback year wouldn’t arrive until 2018.

Replacing Oceana with a completely new base would be far more expensive, with the “plant replacement value” of the base estimated at \$1.2 billion in 2002.

For each base to be closed, the Navy has groups of people working in three major areas: transfer of the mission, actual movement of people and their possessions to the new base, and securing the facility to be closed, said Laura Duchnak, director of the service’s BRAC program office in San Diego.

And in each of those major areas, she said, are groups working on the hundreds of details that go with a closing, from environmental cleanup at the old site to construction and renovation at the new location and transfers of sailors in and out of the units involved.

“You have to have integrated planning,” Duchnak said. If a building is to be demolished, the contractor can’t be scheduled to begin work until movers have cleared everyone out and the movers can’t be put to work until other contractors have completed whatever construction or renovations are needed at the receiving base.

Along with all that, the people overseeing the move have to pay attention to the sailors and

airmen and families being relocated, Leenhouts said. Special provisions have to be made for airmen who are scheduled to be transferred or are about to retire, for example; it would make little sense for the Navy to move them to one place only to have them transfer to a new unit somewhere else within a few weeks, or months, he said.

Leenhouts recalled that the move to Oceana from Cecil Field, near Jacksonville, was unpopular among most aviators, so he had to pay particular attention to morale issues.

“There are so many distractions,” any of which can take a pilot’s or mechanic’s mind off the mission at a critical moment and lead ultimately to the loss of a jet, Leenhouts said.

“The challenge is to not lose track of the small things” – a borrowed wrench inadvertently left inside an engine, a gauge not properly calibrated – “if you don’t pay attention to those, that’s the thing that’s going to kill someone,” he said.

And there are quirks in the BRAC law and Pentagon regulations that can add to the distractions and frustrations that go with any move, Leenhouts added. At Cecil Field, the Navy had aircraft simulators built with 1970s technology, he recalled; better and cheaper replacements were available when the squadrons moved to Oceana, but he was unable to acquire them because the rules bar equipment upgrades as part of a BRAC-ordered move.

“It was frustration after frustration to make this work,” he said.

Depot completes weapons destruction project

The Associated Press State & Local Wire
(Tooele, Utah)
July 31, 2005

The Deseret Chemical Depot reached a milestone Friday - incinerating the last of the deadly chemical VX and GB agents stored at the west desert facility.

The depot holds the largest chemical weapons stockpile in the United States. Under an international treaty, the U.S. must destroy all chemical weapons and nerve agents by 2012.

The facility is one of eight around the country disposing of the weapons, some of which date back to the 1940s.

In May, the Pentagon recommended closing Deseret Chemical Depot once its munitions mission is complete. That decision is still pending the approval of the Base Realignment and Closure Committee.

Depot staff estimate a final closure of the facility could come in 2012, the target date for the completing the destruction of about 125,000 mustard-gas munitions.

With Friday's milestone, about half of the GB agent in the U.S. has now been destroyed, depot public affairs specialist Alaine Southworth said.

Guard asked for alternative to air base cuts; Ellington Field would lose fighters under the current reduction proposal

The Houston Chronicle (Houston, TX)
July 31, 2005

WASHINGTON - The Air Force and the Air National Guard are attempting to reach a compromise over controversial proposals that would strip aircraft from one-third of Guard units nationwide, including a unit based at Ellington Field that flies F-16s.

The independent, nine-member Base Realignment and Closure commission has asked the Guard to devise alternatives to the cuts and present them to the commission, as well as the Air Force.

"We are reaching out saying, give us your insight and perspective so we can work with it," said James Schaefer, a spokesman for the so-called BRAC commission.

The commission has scheduled a hearing for Aug. 11 with Air National Guard and Air Force officials to detail the alternatives. The commission will factor in the Air Guard's proposals on Aug. 22 when it begins adding and removing bases from the military's list.

Local officials have criticized the plan to remove warplanes from Ellington, saying the move would leave the Houston area vulnerable to terrorism.

Under federal law, the panel must present its final base-closure list to President Bush by Sept. 8. The president then has until Sept. 23 to approve it in its entirety or send it back to the panel for revisions. Congress and the president are not allowed to tinker with the list.

The proposals to strip the Air National Guard of planes are some of the most contentious of the Pentagon's May 13 recommendations to the BRAC panel. They have sparked open warfare between the Guard and the active-duty Air Force, which was responsible for devising the recommendations.

But Maj. Gen. Gary Heckman, who led the Air Force group that created the proposals, struck a conciliatory note.

"I am heartened that the commission is going to bring us all to the table," Heckman said. Once the ANG presents alternatives, "We are quite ready to sit down with the commission and (Guard) and work through it."

Schools' fates linked to Oceana's

The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA)
Mike Gruss
August 1, 2005

VIRGINIA BEACH — School leaders will meet next weekend for their annual retreat, to plan for the coming school year and to set long-term goals.

But the addition of Oceana Naval Air Station to a list of federal bases under consideration for

closure will make every decision increasingly complicated.

If Oceana closes, no one knows how many of the Beach's 75,000 students will follow the Navy jets and fly off to another school division.

"I don't know of anything we can do except plan to plan," said board member Dan R. Lowe.

While school and Navy officials say it is nearly impossible to predict how many students the Beach would lose, school leaders acknowledge it will likely be thousands of students. Both groups said any data that tracks parents' employment is limited.

But major declines in student enrollment could force any school division to lay off teachers, take a hard look at finances and consider closing schools.

"To think it would not have an impact on staffing and facilities is not realistic," said Victoria L. Lewis, the school division's chief financial officer. "It would mean a ripple effect."

The 2005 Defense Base Realignment and Closure Commission voted July 19 to put the Virginia Beach base on a list of potential targets for closure and will decide its fate by late August. If the BRAC Commission decides to close Oceana, by law it must close within six years.

But the most immediate decision for the board, members say, will probably deal with school construction.

During the 2005-06 school year, Virginia Beach plans to bid about \$25 million worth of projects for a new elementary school in the Bayside area and two high school additions to ease crowding.

Board members this spring also agreed to start looking for land for a long-discussed 12th high school or for rebuilding Kellam High School.

That search, already in low gear, could shift even lower.

“You can put it on ice – on hold,” said Daniel D. Edwards, the School Board’s chairman. “Or you plan, but you plan with two what-ifs.”

After the new elementary school and high school additions, the board could scrutinize a half-billion dollars in proposed construction projects or offer a new timetable for some projects, Edwards said.

Then, depending on the number of students lost, the board eventually may address whether it needs to close schools.

“Certainly, not in the short term,” Edwards said. “Our schools have been on the huge side.”

Despite redistricting, most Beach high schools exceed 2,000 students. While keeping open all 11 high schools would lead to higher operating costs, Beach officials have complained for years they have little flexibility in the size of the buildings. Oceana’s closing could allow the Beach to have the smaller schools that it previously couldn’t afford.

At the same time, the absence of Oceana could mean more homes in areas where builders have been prohibited, Edwards said.

The “what-if” philosophy continues to the schools’ financial forecast as well.

Because some school funding is allocated on a per-student basis, the loss of Oceana could mean the Beach would lose about \$2,500 for each student who leaves.

And fewer students from military families could mean millions of dollars less in federal grants, Lewis said.

Assuming a significantly smaller student body, Lewis said the shortfall would probably lead the district to lay off teachers and other employees. But without a decision from the federal committee studying the bases or data on how many students the schools could lose, administrators said any prediction is extremely rough.

Board members remain hopeful though. With a large number of teachers nearing retirement, some believe any job losses would be accomplished through attrition or from departing military spouses.

Opinions/ Editorials

Take base commissioners’ words with cautious optimism

Portsmouth Press Herald (Portsmouth, NH)
July 31, 2005

Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was in the news again this past week with the visit of two more Base Realignment and Closure commissioners to the local yard.

There is little doubt from the comments Commissioners Sue Turner and Samuel Skinner made following Tuesday’s visit that they were impressed with the kind and quality of work performed at the yard. They both agreed with their colleagues who had visited in June that Portsmouth was, by far, the most efficient, innovative and capable shipyard in the country - public or private.

Positive statements about the tremendous amount of community support the local yard has were also made by both groups of commissioners. They certainly are cause for a degree of optimism that the Portsmouth yard could wind up being taken off the closure list when the commission makes its final determination near the end of August.

However, the man who knows the most about the machinations involved in the BRAC process had some sobering words for shipyard supporters after the departure of this latest group of commissioners.

“Be careful not to read too much into what seem to be encouraging words,” said Bill McDonough, director of the Save Our Shipyard advocacy group and a former Portsmouth Naval Shipyard commander.

McDonough reminded that the only function of the commission is to determine whether the Pentagon had deviated from its own criteria in putting the Portsmouth yard on the closure list. It cannot remove the shipyard from the list simply because it is efficient or because the commission likes the people who work there.

And proving deviation is no small task given the vagaries of the criteria. It will be remembered that when those standards were first announced, members of the Maine and New Hampshire congressional delegations fought to have them made more specific - and failed.

The commissioners agreed there are concerns about the Pentagon's contention there are more shipyards and personnel available to do submarine overhauls, refuelings and repairs than are necessary now and will be needed in the future. However, the BRAC staff has been given only about a month to investigate this contention, and the Pentagon appears intent on making that investigation difficult, judging from its decision to prevent Adm. William Klemm (retired) from testifying on the shipyard's behalf at the Boston BRAC hearings earlier this month.

This BRAC differs from all of the previous ones in that those were strictly aimed at cutting Department of Defense costs. This latest round, while also designed to cut costs, is also meant to "transform" the existing structure of our military to better engage this country's current and future enemies.

The BRAC list these commissioners are currently debating was developed with an eye toward that transformation, and it is not the purview of this commission to second-guess the Pentagon on this issue.

Sadly, this transformation involves decreasing the number of public shipyards and streamlining the submarine overhaul process. And most of the innovations and efficiencies at the Portsmouth yard were developed by that terrific group of workers there, and those workers will undoubtedly be offered jobs at the three other nuclear shipyards the Pentagon intends to keep open.

Given that reality, it will be particularly hard for the commission to vote to retain a shipyard the Navy wants to close. It is not impossible, but, as members of our congressional delegations have repeatedly told us, it is a long shot.

The best we can do as citizens is continue to contact the commission as it begins its deliberations and show up at the Aug. 13 shipyard appreciation picnic at Pease to show our support. Beyond that, the process, at this point, is out of our control.

BRAC threat creates turf wars

Texarkana Gazette (Texarkana, TX)

Les Minor

July 31, 2005

We've received a few calls in recent weeks from readers saying we're devoting way too much space to the Base Realignment and Closure process and the fate of our local military installation.

Rightly or wrongly, we're not alone in this obsession. Newspapers from other cities and other regions with a dog in this fight seems to be in the same mode. They publish a lot of information. It is generally front page news. A lot of time is given for local and state officials to interpret whatever is said by anyone with any clout along the process route.

Two weeks ago in Rapid City, S.D., for example, while the BRAC hearings with the Pentagon were going on in the nation's capital, the front page there was dominated by BRAC news. During one five-day stretch, BRAC stories were on Page One four days and were lead stories three of those days.

At stake for that corner of South Dakota is Ellsworth Air Force Base and its fleet of B-1 bombers, which the Department of Defense wants to consolidate at Dyess AFB, near Abilene, Texas. The aircraft are roughly split between the two locations.

Ellsworth is no stranger to the BRAC process, having been on the closure list in 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995. Since then, state, regional and local officials have made a significant investment (\$2 million in public and private money) in hopes of keeping the base open. The state chipped in \$500,000. Rapid City added \$250,000. The county added another \$50,000. The stakes were that obvious.

If Ellsworth were closed, it would represent a \$278 annual blow to the regional economy, particularly Rapid City. With more than 5,500 employees, it is the single largest employer in western South Dakota.

While lobbying efforts in Texarkana haven't been funded at that level, the scenario seems similar. Indeed, there are a lot of similarities in what people are doing and saying here and in other places that are fighting closure or downsizing. It is probably a variation of the KIIMBY (Keep It In My Backyard) syndrome.

The main argument being made for keeping Ellsworth is that it is bad strategy to lump all our B-1 Bombers-about 65 of them-in one location. This is the anti eggs-in-one-basket rationale, which has also been made from these parts as it relates to consolidating some of Red River Army Depot's missions elsewhere.

"Placing vital military assets at different locations has always been an unshakable tenet of our national security," says South Dakota Republican Sen. John Thune, who has put forth an amendment to the appropriations bill that would, if passed, delay the BRAC process by about a year, until the Quadrennial Defense Review is finished.

In a strange little cover-all-the-bases twist, South Dakota also argues the opposite side of the issue, saying: If you must put the fleet in one location, Ellsworth is better than Dyess, because we can do it cheaper, for \$47.5 million compared to \$125 million.

Like Texarkana and other places, Ellsworth loyalists question the veracity of the data collected and the methodology used to reach the

final determination. For example, among other things, South Dakota officials say that an unresolved lawsuit against Dyess was never factored into the evaluation process.

The federal lawsuit involving training routes at Dyess was filed on behalf of ranchers and other organizations who said the noise was reducing property values.

The Air Force initially got a favorable ruling, but that was overturned by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court.

While the case has yet to be resolved, in June the district court imposed flying restrictions, including one that allows no aircraft to fly lower than 500 feet until environmental impact can be assessed.

Court documents include an affidavit from a general who says the restrictions "will cause grievous and irreparable harm to Air Force training and the ability of the Air Force to meet its national defense objectives."

Ellsworth has no such restrictions and has huge open and remote spaces for training. This seems like an important point from the perspective of Ellsworth supporters. Dyess would brush it aside and put its own spin on the matter.

Likewise, there were many factors that weren't considered when the Texarkana bases were put on the chopping block, and factors that were often outdated. But in truth, it's difficult to find many points made by the DoD that weren't contested by those not favored.

Maybe the one element all installations under consideration for closing have in common is the inclination to clutch at straws every time the BRAC Commission lets out a sigh. If you want to know what the white hot spotlight feels like, just do a stint on the BRAC Commission.

Everyone with a stake in the process revels in every cryptic word imparted by commissioners, trying to capture glimmers of hope and fan them into a real blaze.

If a commissioner questions the value of something, it is viewed as a positive sign. Like fans who used to scan rock lyrics for hidden meanings, BRAC observers dissect the nuances of DoDspeak for hope.

It takes five votes from the nine commissioners to get off the closure list. Any utterances from any of the nine is up for interpretation.

When the BRAC Commission was quizzing the DoD in Washington, former Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner, a member of the commission, asked what would happen if a major catastrophe took out Dyess? Skinner also wanted to know why it was recommended now when it was saved 10 years earlier? These were seen as meaningful signs by South Dakota officials, that the BRAC Commission wouldn't rubber stamp the DoD plan and understood the vital role the base plays.

Imagine now that every base on the closure list is putting forth the same brave arguments, hoping on hope that they are getting their messages across, and searching for indications that they are getting through to five people-the only five people who can make a difference.

Now overlay all this commotion over the Pentagon's position that if even one element of the submitted plan is altered the effect could ripple through the whole plan and adversely impact the goals, that nothing on the closure list must change.

Add to this all the political wrangling and infighting that is emerging, where states and communities aren't only elevating the attributes of their own bases and picking apart the DoD's plan, but are attacking other communities and installations that are fighting for their existence (see today's front page story and editorial). It is turf warfare at its finest.

For a process that is supposed to be independent and unbiased, this one is crammed full of politics and intrigue, rife with showmanship, and destined to break a lot of hearts.

The good news is that we are not alone in this strange and mangled universe. A lot of communities are doing the same dance we're doing. A lot of them are experiencing the same angst. A lot of them are searching for clues to cling to. Everybody that is for them is right and everybody that is against them is wrong.

No, we are not alone. There are many like us. Unfortunately, in this convoluted battleground called BRAC, it is every place for itself.

Additional Notes