Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission

EARLY BIRD

August 17, 2005

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National News Articles

U.S. States Await Pennsylvania Base Closure Suit

New York Times
August 16, 2005

PHILADELPHIA (Reuters) - Pennsylvania's governor will argue in federal court next week that the Pentagon's plan to close a military base near Philadelphia is unconstitutional because he has ultimate authority over state militias and he was not consulted.

The case will be closely watched by other U.S states affected by the program because it could set a precedent for other governors unhappy with Washington's plans to shut or scale back bases.

U.S. District Judge John Padova will hear the case -- filed by Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell against Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Pennsylvania's Republican Senators Arlen Specter and Rick Santorum -- on Tuesday.

The suit, the first of its kind to make it to court, contends that the U.S. Defense Department violated the U.S. Constitution by failing to obtain Rendell's consent before publishing plans to close Willow Grove Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, at a cost of more than 1,200 jobs.

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The closure is part of a plan announced in May to shut or cut back 837 facilities in all 50 states, the first program of domestic base reductions in a decade, and one more severe than four previous rounds.

Illinois has also sued the Pentagon over the plan, citing federal laws preventing changes to National Guard units without the consent of the state's governor. Missouri has threatened similar action, saying Rumsfeld has ``run roughshod'' over states' Constitutional rights to run militias.

Closing Willow Grove would deactivate the 111th Fighter Wing, which must be ``available to me as governor to perform state active-duty missions dealing with homeland security, natural disasters and other state missions,'' Rendell told the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission in July.

Rendell also argues that Willow Grove is in a strategically important location between New York and Washington, so its forces can respond quickly to future attacks on those cities.

Defense Department spokesman Glenn Flood declined to comment on the challenges by Pennsylvania and other states.

Members of the BRAC Commission, an independent body reviewing the Pentagon's plan, cast doubt on the savings that would result, saying the projected $48.8 billion cost reductions over 20 years are probably overstated by almost 50 percent, The New York Times reported on Sunday after interviews with seven of the commission members.

Local News Articles

Virginia To Spend Millions To Save Base

Washington Times (Washington DC)
Sue Lindsey
August 17, 2005

VIRGINIA BEACH -- Officials announced plans yesterday to spend $182 million to block development around Oceana Naval Air Station in an effort to persuade the federal base closing commission to keep it open.

After a closed session, the Virginia Beach City Council announced a joint plan with the state to seek the $15 million purchase of a 6-acre site where a 72-unit condominium project was planned.

Vice Mayor Louis Jones said the state will supply the $250,000 option money, and the state and city would split the purchase price, should the deal go through. The option only will apply if the Base Realignment and Closure Commission decides to keep Oceana open.

"This development has become a lightening rod for the BRAC Commission as they determine whether to put NAS Oceana on the base closure list," Mr. Jones said.

In an interview Monday with the Virginian-Pilot, BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony J. Principi acknowledged that some progress had been made in addressing development near the base, but said "complicated issues" remain regarding land already zoned for development.

"I hope there's a way that some of these issues can be resolved without the need to move out of Oceana," Mr. Principi told the Virginian-Pilot.

Mr. Principi was not immediately available for comment yesterday.

Mr. Jones said the city also has signed a contract to buy 23 acres of land just outside the base's main gate for $1.1 million. In addition, the city plans to spend up to $161 million over 20 years to buy land for development rights from "willing sellers" between Oceana and a practice landing field in Chesapeake.

The city also has requested $5 million from the federal government to purchase rights on property development.

William Leighty, Gov. Mark Warner's chief of staff, said the actions yesterday demonstrated that Virginia Beach officials were seeking a "true partnership" with the Navy.

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When it was noted that the Navy had opposed the 72-unit condominium project two years ago, Mr. Jones said the zoning on the site permitted even greater development with a hotel or a larger condo project.

Asked whether the council's actions would preserve the Navy's presence at Oceana in the future, Mr. Jones said he didn't know.

"We do know what they are telling us now and what the BRAC Commission is telling us now," he said.

Oceana is Virginia Beach's largest employer, with a military and civilian staff of nearly 17,000. It is home to about 140 F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets and about 50 F-14 Tomcats.

The base, which trains aircraft carrier pilots, was a late addition to the military bases BRAC is considering for closure. It was not on the Defense Department's list of recommendations, but was added after commission researchers said neighborhood development was encroaching on pilots' ability to practice taking off and landing at all hours.

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chief of naval operations, told the BRAC panel earlier this month that the Navy had considered other options and found Oceana to be the best location for its East Coast fighter plane hub.

Even so, the BRAC Commission has scheduled a hearing Saturday to consider reopening Cecil Field in Florida to replace Oceana. The base near Jacksonville was closed in 1999.

North Carolina and Texas also have submitted proposals to replace the Virginia Beach base.

The commission begins voting Aug. 24 on its recommendations to President Bush.

Wilson Meets With Base-Closure Panelists

Albuquerque Journal (Albuquerque, NM)
Miguel Navrot
August 16, 2005

Rep. Heather Wilson, R-N.M., spoke Monday with two baseclosing panelists who will help decide the future of Cannon Air Force Base.

Wilson, a former Air Force officer, spoke with retired Rep. Jim Hansen, a Utah Republican, and retired Brig. Gen. Sue Ellen Turner, about keeping Cannon open. A decision on whether the Air Force can close Cannon is expected next week, when the Base Realignment and Closure Commission meets.

In their discussions, Wilson said she noted a proposal to expand supersonic air space around Cannon and the difficulties of reclaiming for future needs bases that have been closed.

The two gave Wilson no firm indication how Cannon will fare when the commission votes, she said. At least five commissioners must agree to remove a base from the Pentagon's list of properties to close.

Hansen, a former House colleague of Wilson's who retired in 2003, told her the panel will be honest in their decisions.

"This won't be a political decision, it'll be a national security kind of decision," Wilson said Monday in a telephone interview. She noted Hansen feels Cannon is "a good base."

Cannon sits seven miles west of Clovis and is an anchor for the local economy.

Cannon campaign winding down

The Associated Press State & Local Wire (Clovis, NM)
August 16, 2005

Supporters trying to remove Cannon Air Force Base from a list of bases the Pentagon wants to close are wrapping up their campaign as the independent Base Realignment and Closure Commission prepares to work on final recommendations.

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Members of the state's congressional delegation, along with Gov. Bill Richardson, have been making final calls to commissioners in recent days, said Chad Lydick, a member of the Committee of Fifty, a base support group.

Lydick said commissioners have been receptive to new information, but added: "As far as how much longer we'll be given that opportunity, that may even be closed (now)."

Backers of Cannon have contacted BRAC commissioners about plans to expand the base and have tried to promote the base as the site for a Joint Strike Fighter jet airplane, scheduled for release in 2008. On Friday, state and local officials announced a deal with property owners near Cannon, who agreed to sell land to enable the base to nearly double its size.

Cannon supporters contend the May 13 recommendation to close the eastern New Mexico base, home to F-16 units, did not take into account the fact the Air Force has been working to expand the training range around Cannon.

The commission plans meetings Aug. 24-27 in Washington to decide which bases will close, officials have said.

The commission has until Sept. 8 to make its recommendations to President Bush, who can forward the list without changes to Congress. Congress then must decide to approve or disapprove the entire list.

Five of the nine commissioners would have to vote to remove Cannon from the list.

"We've had no commitments (from commissioners), just lots and lots of discussions," Lydick said. "I think they are all very intimately aware of the economic impact and they are very in tune with the scenario that a lot of the Air Force cost savings analysis is flawed. ... I think we'll get a fair shake."

The Pentagon estimated it would save $2.7 billion over 20 years by closing Cannon at a cost of 2,385 military employees and 384 civilian jobs at the base plus about 2,000 indirect jobs. Cannon's economic impact has been estimated at $200 million a year, about a third of the economy in the Clovis community of about 36,000.

Rep. Heather Wilson, R-N.M., said she talked by telephone Monday with BRAC Commissioners James Hansen and Sue Ellen Turner.

"My sense is they are very impressed by (Cannon and the community) and they were very glad to get additional information. ... Those things said, I don't think they have any idea about how things will turn out," she said.

She said she told the commissioners she had concerns about the accuracy of information the Defense Department has distributed about Cannon and with the costs of closing bases in general.

Loss of Air Guard planes would cripple emergency response

The Associated Press State & Local Wire (Reno, NV)
August 16, 2005

The loss of eight, Nevada Air National Guard C-130 cargo planes under a proposed military restructuring runs contrary to mandates by the federal government to plan for terrorism and disasters, local and state emergency managers said.

"The disconnect is not lost on us," said Col. Jon Proehl, commander of the 152nd Airlift Wing based at the Reno-Tahoe International Airport.

Marty Scheuerman, Reno's fire marshal and emergency services manager, said the military is a close partner is disaster planning.

"We've trained with them. We're built into their plans, they're built into our plans," he said.

The Pentagon has proposed moving the eight planes based in Reno to Little Rock, Ark., as part of a national military restructuring.

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The Base Realignment and Closure Commission is scheduled to begin hearings on the recommendations Aug. 24, before making its own recommendations to President Bush on Sept. 8.

Proehl said the Air National Guard in the Channel Islands near Los Angeles would be the only full squadron of C-130s west of the Rockies if the planes are moved out of Reno.

Since California has not signed a compact to provide assistance to other states when requested, it's questionable whether timely help would be available during an emergency, he said.

BRAC Chairman Anthony Principi visited the Nevada Guard base in Reno last month, and Proehl flew with him to Hawthorne, where the Army Ammunition Depot has been tapped for closure.

"I was able to show him the vastness of the region and the Martis fire location, which is still pretty dramatic," Proehl told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

In another visit in July, Proehl took Commissioner Philip Coyle on a flight over a fire in the Sierra where the plane's unique Scathe View surveillance equipment was used.

The Reno-based planes are the only ones in the world hard-wired to carry Scathe View equipment used to support firefighters and soldiers on the ground, survey earthquake damage or help with rescue missions, Air Guard officials said.

"We have developed an infrared system that can look through the smoke of a fire to help develop an attack plan that can be instituted at first light," Proehl said. "We can map the fire at night by looking through the smoke."

The planes assisted firefighters in Southern California two years ago when massive fires destroyed 3,650 homes.

The eight cargo planes are not the biggest, with capacity for only 90 soldiers or three Humvees, but they are versatile. In Nevada, they can land on the smallest dirt air strips.

The planes also would be invaluable in any major doomsday scenario, being able to deliver medications and other supplies in a fraction of the time it would take to transport them by trucks, officials said.

BRAC panel votes next week

Montgomery Advertiser (Montgomery, AL)
Greg Wright
August 16, 2005

WASHINGTON -- The fate of thousands of workers at a high-tech support unit at Alabama's Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base could be clearer next week.

The nine-member, independent Base Realignment and Closure commission will hold public votes on Pentagon plans to close or restructure military facilities around the country Aug. 24-27.

Five of the nine commissioners would have to vote against the Pentagon's plans to move Maxwell-Gunter's Operations and Sustainment Systems Group to Massachusetts for the Alabama jobs to be spared.

Pentagon officials said the unit fits better at a technical research and development center at Hanscom Air Force Base near Boston. But Alabama Gov. Bob Riley, other lawmakers and local officials said the move makes no sense because the unit does mostly computer support work, not research.

The move could cost the Montgomery area economy $ 750 million and 3,254 jobs, including those Maxwell-Gunter hoped to gain in the next five years.

The commission will hold votes on each Pentagon recommendation, but it is still uncertain which day the Maxwell-Gunter vote

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will come up, BRAC commission spokesman Robert McCreary said.

C-SPAN2, a cable public affairs network, said it plans to televise every day of the voting.

The base closing commission will send its recommendations to President Bush by Sept. 8. Bush could then send the list on to Congress for approval or back to the BRAC commission for more work.

The list of recommendations must be approved or rejected in its entirety.

Riley met with BRAC commissioners last week in support of Maxwell-Gunter and other state military facilities. Rep. Terry Everett, R-Rehobeth, who represents the Maxwell-Gunter area, would not predict how the commission would vote, spokesman Mike Lewis said.

"We'll certainly be monitoring it as best as we can," Lewis said.

BRAC or not, missile jobs ahead

MDA chief expects city to get about 2,200 if plan OK'd

Huntsville Times (Huntsville, AL)
Shelby G. Spires
August 17, 2005

Huntsville could gain about 2,200 Missile Defense Agency jobs if the Pentagon's recommendations survive the Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, process, said Lt. Gen. Trey Obering, MDA commanding general in Washington, D.C.

Obering told The Times Tuesday that, even though reorganization of MDA is part of the Pentagon's BRAC recommendation, it is also part of an overall plan to consolidate the Missile Defense Agency.

"There will be a reorganization even if the BRAC recommendations are not approved," Obering said.

Obering said if the Pentagon's BRAC recommendations are approved, "then we will move more than 2,000 (jobs)." If the panel's recommendations are not approved, a smaller number would be relocated and the majority would stay in the Washington area after a central headquarters facility is built.

In May, the Pentagon asked the president's BRAC panel to move MDA research and management jobs to Huntsville. It was part of an overall recommendation that would move anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 jobs to North Alabama, depending on the number of contractor positions that follow the government work.

Obering didn't say exactly how many of the 2,200 MDA-related jobs are contractor positions, or if the 2,200 figure is in addition to about 1,600 government jobs set to come here from other BRAC recommendations. The Pentagon has recommended that the headquarters of the Army Materiel Command and the Space & Missile Defense Command move to Redstone Arsenal, along with a bulk of MDA's work.

All of those commands are headquartered in northern Virginia, where high rent and questionable security are a problem for the Pentagon.

If the Pentagon's recommendations stand and 2,200 jobs do move here, overall command of MDA would remain in Washington, Obering said.

"There is quite a bit of oversight (in Congress) that goes on for this agency and" it makes sense for the MDA commander to remain in Washington, he said.

"I would spend a lot more time in Huntsville, though," Obering said.

The BRAC panel is finalizing its recommendations, based on the Pentagon suggestions released in May, and should forward its report to President Bush by Sept. 8.

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Congress should begin deliberations on the BRAC and Bush recommendations in November and has until the end of this session to vote on the suggestions.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, said Tuesday if the Pentagon's full recommendations for work relocation are approved by the BRAC panel, then it would be "very good for Huntsville."

"Lord willing and the creek don't rise, then the BRAC recommendations will stand and Huntsville will have a lot more to do with" the Missile Defense Agency, Sessions said.

The Kinetic Energy Interceptor, a Northrop-Grumman program managed in Huntsville, is in a slowdown because of budget problems, Obering said. The $4.5 billion program could create a Patriot missile-type interceptor that would destroy enemy missiles shortly after launch, or in the boost phase as military planners call it.

Obering said technology innovations and a powerful booster designed for KEI could create a missile that would destroy enemy missiles after launch, in flight and just before they strike a target.

But the value of the program is not widely known on Capitol Hill, Obering said. "It's an education problem," he said. "We have to educate" members of Congress about the value of the program.

Obering said members of Congress are confused about the KEI missile's role and don't understand what type of missile it is or where it would strike.

KEI could be used across the board, on land and on ships, Obering said, which makes it a very flexible defensive system.

In a perfect world, Obering said, the KEI program would be accelerated and put into the hands of soldiers as soon as possible.

"We live in reality, however."

Beach moves to guard Oceana

City would buy land to deter development to satisfy base panel

Richmond Times Dispatch (Richmond, VA)
Sue Lindsey
August 17, 2005

VIRGINIA BEACH -- Officials announced plans yesterday to spend $182 million to block development around Oceana Naval Air Station in an effort to persuade the federal base-closing commission to keep it open. Following a closed session, the Virginia Beach City Council announced a joint plan with the state to seek the $15 million purchase of 6 acres where a 72-unit condominium project was planned.

Vice Mayor Louis Jones said the state will supply the $250,000 option money and the state and city would split the purchase price, should the deal go through. The option will apply only if the Base Closure and Realignment Commission decides to keep Oceana open.

"This development has become a lightning rod for the BRAC Commission as they determine whether to put NAS Oceana on the base closure list," Jones said.

In an interview Monday with The Virginian-Pilot, BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony J. Principi acknowledged that some progress had been made in addressing development near the base, but said "complicated issues" remain regarding land already zoned for development.

"I hope there's a way that some of these issues can be resolved without the need to move out of Oceana," Principi told the Norfolk newspaper. Principi was not immediately available for comment yesterday.

Jones said the city also has signed a contract to buy 23 acres just outside the base's main gate for $1.1 million. In addition, the city plans to spend up to $161 million over 20 years to buy land for development rights from "willing sellers" between Oceana and a practice landing field in Chesapeake.

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The city also has requested $5 million from the federal government to purchase rights on property development.

William Leighty, Gov. Mark Warner's chief of staff, said the actions yesterday demonstrated that Virginia Beach officials were seeking a "true partnership" with the Navy.

When it was noted that the Navy had opposed the 72-unit condominium project two years ago, Jones said the zoning on the site permitted even greater development with a hotel or a larger condo project.

Asked whether the council's actions would preserve the Navy's presence at Oceana, Jones said he didn't know.

"We do know what they are telling us now and what the BRAC Commission is telling us now," he said.

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The base, which trains aircraft carrier pilots, was a late addition to the military bases BRAC is considering for closure. It was not on the Defense Department's list of recommendations but was added after commission researchers said neighborhood development was encroaching on pilots' ability to practice taking off and landing at all hours.

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chief of naval operations, told the BRAC panel earlier this month that the Navy had considered other options and found Oceana to be the best location for its East Coast fighter-plane hub.

Even so, the BRAC Commission has scheduled a hearing Saturday to consider reopening Cecil Field in Florida to replace Oceana. The base near Jacksonville was closed in 1999.

North Carolina and Texas also have submitted proposals to replace the Virginia Beach base.

The commission begins voting Aug. 24 on its recommendations to President Bush.

Lawmakers, Rell Forward Documents To BRAC Chief

'Smoking gun' memo among those aiding case for sub base

New London Day (New London, CT)
Anthony Cronin
August 17, 2005

The state's congressional delegation and Gov. M. Jodi Rell on Tuesday sent documents to the chairman of the base-closure commission, including a “smoking gun” memo that says the Navy underestimated the cost to move the Naval Submarine School to Kings Bay, Georgia.

The “Team Connecticut” correspondence to Anthony Principi, chairman of the federal Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, includes the internal memo from Navy Capt. Arnold O. Lotring, the director of the Submarine Learning Center, which would oversee the proposed move of the nation's oldest submarine school to its new quarters in Georgia.

Todd Mitchell, chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, said it would be the first time that BRAC commissioners and staff saw the Navy memo. Those fighting the closure of the Naval Submarine Base have termed the memo a “white-hot smoking gun” that could seriously erode the Pentagon's plans first announced in May to shutter the 687-acre submarine base and move its submarines and various commands to Navy bases in Kings Bay and in Norfolk, Va.

In addition, the delegation and Rell included a cover memo to Principi reiterating the importance of the Navy memo and also included an updated cost-benefit analysis by state officials that claims it would cost the Navy $641 million to close the base rather than the $1.6 billion in savings estimated by defense officials.

“During my visit to Kings Bay, I raised serious concerns about the lack of adequate facilities at the Georgia base to accommodate the

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relocation," said Simmons. "The Lotring memo confirms that our analysis on infrastructure and costs is right on the money."

The memo said the sub school in Georgia would need 100 new classrooms, but the Navy estimates only call for 71 classrooms to be built at the Kings Bay facility, which houses the Navy's large Trident ballistic-missile submarines. The Navy has said the classrooms could be standard construction, but the memo maintains that sub school classrooms would require special air conditioning, heating, electrical and computer equipment, which would increase the expense of constructing such specialized facilities.

The memo also says a sub school at Kings Bay would require specialized dormitories, a larger cafeteria and a Navy brig for at least six people. It also suggests that the school would need to include an expanded or new indoor gymnasium for the sub school students. The Day first obtained the internal Navy memo earlier this month.

Rell again took issue with the proposed move. "Moving the sub school means everything that already exists in Connecticut would have to be rebuilt, at taxpayer expense, and all the equipment and simulators in Groton would have to be packed up and shipped — again at taxpayer expense," she said.

The state's senators said the Lotring memo would clearly show the BRAC commissioners that the Navy's analysis to move the school was flawed. U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., said the commissioners would see from the memo that the Navy "substantially underestimated the cost of closing (the base)."

U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., said the memo is of great significance to the fight to save the Groton submarine base. "Clearly, it indicates a major deviation from BRAC criteria," he said. "But it also calls into question the entire process by which the Pentagon reached this decision."

Groton supporters looking for hero on BRAC panel

Norwich Bulletin (Norwich, CT)
Ray Hackett
August 16, 2005

NEW LONDON -- The only thing missing in the state's fight to keep the Groton submarine base open is a member of BRAC commission willing to make a motion to remove Groton from the list.

"I'm looking for a hero," U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, told members of the Subase Realignment Coalition Monday at its weekly meeting. "That's my focus over the next week to 10 days, to find a commissioner who is willing to do the right thing for the Navy, the country and the future of America's dominance in subsurface technology."

The nine-member independent Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission will begin its final deliberations next week. It has scheduled morning, afternoon and evening sessions in Washington, Aug. 24-27. The panel has until Sept. 8 to submit a final base-closing list to the president.

It takes five commissioners to remove a base from the Pentagon list released May 13, if they are convinced the secretary of defense substantially deviated from the BRAC selection criteria. Connecticut officials have pored over thousands of Defense Department documents, finding flaws in the Pentagon calculations and disputing the projected costs and savings related to Groton's closing.

Won't speculate
But no one associated with the state's effort is willing to speculate on exactly how many commissioners might be leaning in favor of the state's argument.

"I think it's fair to say that the commissioners are very skeptical of the Defense Department's projected costs and savings," Coalition Chairman John Markowicz said. "The question is, is that a substantial deviation."

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Markowicz said he believes the final determination will be made on military value, the major criteria of the BRAC process. He is convinced the state has made a strong case demonstrating how Groton's military value was grossly underrated.

The main purpose of the BRAC process, however, is to reduce overall costs. There, too, state officials contend they have successfully refuted the Pentagon's projections.

The state forwarded one last package to the BRAC Commission during the weekend, documenting the miscalculations. The state contends it will cost nearly $1.2 billion to close Groton and relocate its commands elsewhere, nearly double the Pentagon's projection of $680 million. The Pentagon also projected an overall $1.6 billion in savings during 20 years. The state is countering that by claiming there will be no savings. It actually will cost taxpayers $640 million.

"Team Connecticut has put together an air-tight case for saving our submarine base," Gov. M. Jodi Rell said of the final submission. "Point by point, issue after issue, we have been able to refute every argument for closing the base. Our arguments are convincing."

No public support
But no member of the commission has publicly supported Connecticut's position or expressed support for removing the base from the closing list. As a whole, the commission has publicly questioned the Pentagon's cost and savings projections, expressed concerns over the potential loss of Groton and the synergy with submarine builder Electric Boat and questioned the overall impact base closing recommendations will have on New England -- the hardest hit region in the country under the Pentagon plan.

BRAC Chairman Anthony Principi, in several interviews last week, said he believed the commission likely will be united in its position on the major base closing recommendations.

"I'm encouraged by that. I think that it's a signal," Markowicz said. "But my position is that we need five votes."

Right now, no one is willing to speculate on anything.

Opinions/ Editorials

BRAC attack; Process can't escape politics

Anchorage Daily News (Anchorage, AK)
August 17th, 2005

The Base Realignment and Closure Commission has its hands full under the best of circumstances. But now a majority of the nine-member panel has come to believe that the savings projected by the Pentagon for this round of closings are inaccurate.

Alaskans received an introduction to the Pentagon's shaky math at a BRAC hearing in Fairbanks in June. Sen. Ted Stevens, University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton and others described why the savings projected for the closing of Eielson Air Force Base were erroneous. Many of the "savings," the critics argued, were really a transfer of dollars from Alaska to other parts of the country.

In July, investigators working on behalf of Congress challenged the Pentagon's findings, issuing a report that estimated close to half the savings were merely a rearrangement of where the military's money would be spent.

The Pentagon stands by its numbers.

The BRAC process was created to insulate base closures from politics. Presidents, senators -- everyone in Washington -- knew the elected representatives of communities proposed for closure would rush to prevent it if the usual political process were followed. This is what happened in the early 1960s when the Air Force discussed closing Ladd Field near Fairbanks. Sen. Ernest Gruening and others put on the heat

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and while the Air Force left Ladd, the Army entered and renamed the base Fort Wainwright.

Forty years later, base-closure opponents have become highly sophisticated. No longer is the fight left to congressmen and senators. Opponents hire lobbyists and consultants, establish citizens groups, develop mountains of data -- all to prove that their base is vital to national security. This is what the defenders of Eielson did -- and they did a very good job of it.

By law, BRAC commissioners must give priority to national security -- the military value of retaining or closing a base. Military value trumps everything, a member of the panel told The New York Times. And with the Pentagon's "savings" discredited, military value will be the core of the commissioners' argument for individual closures.

President Bush says he will accept the panel's recommendations and pass them along to Congress to keep the process "nonpolitical." Clearly the process has become intensely political -- and will remain so no matter what the BRAC commissioners decide about military value and national security.

BOTTOM LINE: Base closings hit people right in the wallet. They will always be political.

'Save Niagara' letter-writers are nation's most prolific

Mail flow at 123,000 for base to stay open
Buffalo News (Buffalo, NY)
Anna Miller
August 16, 2005

The Niagara Military Affairs Council on Monday concluded its letter-writing campaign in support of the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station's removal from the Pentagon's base-closure list.
The public feedback and community support for the Niagara Falls base has been larger than that involving any other proposed closure, according to James Schaffer, director of communications for the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

The flood of letters from Western New York put Niagara into the lead over Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico, which held the lead in early July.

"Niagara is the largest by an ample margin," Schaffer said.

The council has submitted more than 123,000 letters from community members to the panel, which is scheduled to decide the fate of the base Aug. 25.

"(Community efforts) have shown that Niagara and Western New York can really stand together when there's a concern we all have," said Merrell Lane, chairman of the council.

State Sens. George D. Maziarz, R-Newfane; Dale M. Volker, R-Depew; and Mary Lou Rath, R-Williamsville, said they received an almost 65 percent response to mailings throughout Western New York requesting constituents to send letters in support of the base.

The Niagara group coordinated rallies at the BRAC commissioners' June visit to Buffalo and gave out 10,000 tickets to a "Support the Troops" Bisons game in exchange for letters of support.

They have spoken to dozens of community groups and set up booths at numerous festivals throughout the summer.

The ceremonial final letter to be sent to the commission was signed by Army Staff Sgt. David Bellavia, an Iraq War hero from Waterport.

Bellavia trained at the Niagara Falls base, which he describes as a "world-class facility," before his service in Iraq, where he saved the lives of his squad by killing a group of insurgents during a firefight in Fallujah.

"We need this facility in our back yard," said Bellavia, who has earned the Conspicuous Service Cross, New York State's top military honor, and is under consideration for the Medal

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of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor in combat.

"This is where I cut my teeth in training, and I'm awfully proud of this facility," Bellavia said.

In another development, Rep. Thomas M. Reynolds, R-Clarence, wrote to the chairman of the commission to complain that the Air Force had underestimated the environmental cleanup costs that would be incurred if the base were closed.

An analysis by environmental experts at the base, which Reynolds sent to commission Chairman Anthony J. Principi, showed that the cleanup costs would total $3.86 million.

"As you know, the Pentagon is required to completely restore any base they close for future use," Reynolds wrote. "Given that fact, the question remains how restoration of the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station is possible when no environmental cleanup has been factored into Air Force cost estimates."

The environmental cleanup would stem from removal of fuel tanks used by aircraft at the base and from various waste-storage areas on the property.

Reynolds said the cleanup figures "provide further evidence that closing the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station will not provide savings to the Department of Defense."

The congressman has maintained that the Air Force could show savings from the proposed closure only by including personnel costs in its calculations.

Many of the positions from the Niagara base would be transferred elsewhere, and the Government Accountability Office has said that it is improper for the Pentagon to count such transferred personnel costs as savings.

"The military value of this base is so strong that I believe it will almost cost the Pentagon money to close it," Reynolds said.

He said he will use the final days before the panel's vote to transmit to the commissioners a copy of an e-mail message calling members of the 914th Airlift Wing for a third tour of duty in the war on terrorism.

"The sophistication and the ability of our men and women in the 914th has been activated now for a third time," Reynolds said. "And the vote will occur by the BRAC commission while these men and women leave their base (for Iraq), not knowing whether they will have a base to come back to."

Additional Notes

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