

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission

EARLY



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October 17, 2005

Department of Defense Releases

N/A

National News Articles

[House committee backs base-closure proposals](#)

[Base-closing opponents are down to their final options](#)

[Enclaved Base Personnel Could Become Contingency Response Groups](#)

Local News Articles

[Ellington Field might be getting second chance \(San Antonio, TX\)](#)

[Bottling The BRAC Potion \(New London, CT\)](#)

[Sub Base Fight Highlights Region's Strengths And Needs \(New London, CT\)](#)

[BRAC Victory Should Offer The Model For Teamwork \(New London, CT\)](#)

Opinions/ Editorials

[It's Important To Learn From Our Failures \(New London, CT\)](#)

Additional Notes

N/A

Department of Defense Releases

N/A

National News Articles

House committee backs base-closure proposals

Member questions savings from previous rounds

Air Force Times

Rick Maze

October 17, 2005

With a question left hanging about whatever happened to the savings from past base-closing rounds, a House committee voted 43-14 to endorse the proposals of the independent Base Closure and Realignment Commission.

The vote, on a motion to approve or reject the panel's recommendations, is a sign that little can be done to save the several dozen bases targeted for closure and the hundreds more due for realignment, including seven significant reductions, that were approved by the bipartisan commission.

Technically, the recorded vote came on a motion to oppose a resolution of disapproval, a sort of double negative in which "yes" votes supported base closings and "no" votes opposed the recommendations.

Rep. Ray LaHood, R-Ill., concerned about his district losing the 183rd Fighter Wing, is the chief sponsor of the resolution, which now goes to the House floor.

The 14 votes in opposition to base closings fell into two groups. Some, like Reps. Gene Taylor, D-Miss., and Solomon Ortiz, D-Texas, voted to protect bases in their district slated for closure. Ortiz, worried about Naval Air Station Ingleside, Texas, said closing major bases on the Gulf Coast is a mistake because of the need for homeland security and natural-disaster relief in the area. Several Virginia lawmakers also voted against base closings because of uncertainty about the long-term fate of Naval Air Station Oceana.

But some lawmakers simply oppose the process. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, said he could not support the new recommendations because he has never gotten an answer from the Pentagon about what happened to the billions of dollars in supposed savings from the four previous base-closing rounds.

Abercrombie said he has repeatedly asked defense officials to detail what happened to the savings and to name any program that received more money as a result of base closures. He said he has never received a reply.

“Can anyone here say what happened to the money?” he said, receiving no answer.

The Government Accountability Office said in a May report that past base-closing rounds have yielded \$29 billion in savings, but was unable to show what happened to the money. GAO auditors said it is assumed the savings were absorbed into the defense budget without leaving a clear trail.

Savings, the report says, are “mostly cost avoidances.”

The 2005 base-closing panel claims that following its proposals would yield about \$30 billion in savings over 20 years, although Abercrombie said about half of that would come not from cutting costs but from freeing up personnel to serve in different jobs. The remaining \$15 billion in savings over 20 years does not seem enough to justify the pain being caused to communities by the process, he said.

Although he ended up voting for the recommendations, Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, ranking Democrat on the armed services committee, said he was unhappy with how the White House and Pentagon handled the process.

Defense officials made it difficult for lawmakers and communities to get their hands on the supporting data used by the Defense Department to draw up its initial recommendations about closing bases, and much of the information was later found to be erroneous, Skelton said.

“This journey has been more difficult than it needed to be,” he said, predicting this would be the last round of base closings for many years.

There is no similar legislation pending in the Senate, and a vote there would occur only in the unlikely event that the full House passes LaHood’s motion to disapprove the recommendations.

Senators seem mostly resigned to the fate of their bases, although some — such as Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss. — have objected to the commission’s decisions.

A group of Georgia politicians, led by Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., is trying to protect what it can. Chambliss, Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue have sent a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asking for the exchange and commissary complex at Fort Gillem, Ga., to remain open even though the base-closings panel recommends closing that post as well as nearby Naval Air Station Atlanta and Fort McPherson.

Precedent exists from previous rounds for keeping base shopping facilities open even when the base that hosts them shuts down, mainly to serve the retiree community in a given area.

Base-closing opponents are down to their final options

St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Philip Dine
October 16, 2005

WASHINGTON Hopes are dimming, but not yet extinguished, among those opposing the base-closing plan approved by President George W. Bush and now before Congress.

Two hopes remain for legislators in Missouri and Illinois who are concerned about a number of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission's decisions. They are: That the measure of disapproval introduced by Rep. Ray LaHood, R-Ill., is adopted by the full House and moves to the Senate for a vote. That the court cases filed by Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and a handful of other states, over elements of the BRAC recommendations such as closing of Air National Guard bases, get decided in favor of the states.

Missouri officials were angered by plans to send more than 2,000 defense jobs out of St. Louis and to close the 131st Air National Guard Fighter Wing at Lambert Field, while Illinois officials oppose the plans to take the planes from the 1283rd Fighter Wing in Springfield.

LaHood's measure got more negative than positive votes in the House Armed Services Committee but may still come up for a vote by the full House.

For Congress to kill the base-closing plan, the disapproval measure must clear the House and then the Senate. Missouri's two Republican senators, Christopher "Kit" Bond and Jim Talent, had indicated last month that they would vote against the base-closing plan. But they have decided not to introduce a measure of disapproval in the Senate.

"There was not enough support in the House or the Senate to carry it," said Talent spokesman Rich Chrismer. "Sen. Talent believes if you try something knowing it will not get many votes, you tend to weaken your position."

Congress has 45 legislative days from the time it received the plan from the White House to vote to kill the measure, otherwise it is adopted. That period expires around Nov. 8.

Because key senators, such as Republicans John Thune, S.D., and Olympia Snowe, Maine, along with Democrat Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., were relieved when the BRAC Commission saved their bases, it's unlikely that Congress will vote against the plan, analysts say. They noted the overwhelming committee vote against LaHood's plan.

"Since the House Armed Services committee last month rejected by a vote of 43 to 14 an attempt to block BRAC, it's clear that the proposal won't pass the House," said Bond spokesman Rob Ostrander. "Unfortunately, the lack of support in the House to derail BRAC makes action in the Senate a moot point."

Meanwhile, court cases await, and if Congress fails to reject the BRAC plan and it becomes law, that is likely to spur rulings on those cases.

Andrew Ross, a spokesman for Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, said the governor "still hopes the Congress makes the right decision and rejects the BRAC recommendations." If not, Ross said, "Gov. Blagojevich believes we are certainly prepared to go back to court, because our case is solid."

Illinois, like some other states, lost its effort to get a quick ruling before Bush sent the plan to Congress; the state's case remains with the Court of Appeals in Chicago.

Enclaved Base Personnel Could Become Contingency Response Groups

Inside the Air Force
October 14, 2005

Air National Guard and National Guard Bureau officials have begun work on an initiative that would utilize personnel at certain military bases enclaved during the base realignment and closure process for new quick-response teams, a service official told Inside the Air Force this week.

These envisioned "contingency response groups" (CRGs) would support deployed forces tasked with establishing bases on foreign

territory, Future Total Force Directorate chief Brig. Gen. Allison Hickey said during an Oct. 11 interview. They also could be mobilized to assist state officials in the wake of domestic emergencies. The tentatively dubbed "joint state headquarters initiative" originally was envisioned by National Guard chief Army Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, the one-star said.

Enclaving some facilities was part of the Air Force's strategy in preparing its portion of the Pentagon's May list of BRAC proposals. The idea was to shrink the service's footprint at a number of Guard and Reserve bases throughout the country, removing aircraft and other capabilities but retaining base personnel. This approach, according to the service, would create a homeland defense force that would include key Air Force specialties considered important to state chief executives.

The BRAC Commission approved many of those enclave proposals in its final report, approved by the president Sept. 15 and currently being considered by Congress. That report calls for enclaving around 30 such installations.

While opening bases is not a new mission, the expeditionary nature of U.S. forces requires the establishment of air bases in forward locations. For instance, opening air bases in Iraqi territory during the early stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom required a range of preparation, from shoring up existing airfields that would handle volumes of follow-on mobility and tactical aircraft, to establishing bases from which Army ground troops would operate.

This spring, Air Mobility Command stood up two Contingency Response Wings at McGuire Air Force Base, NJ, and Travis AFB, CA, each composed of three CRGs, for rapidly establishing bases of fbases of operation on foreign soil.

Hickey told ITAF the new support CRGs would leave the initial seizure operations to AMC forces and focus instead on the 15- to 45-day period after the base is established to further stabilize things crucial to the site's operation, including security, air traffic control,

intelligence and others. Not all the envisioned CRGs would have the same mission. Affected personnel are already highly qualified in their primary specialties, Hickey noted. Each CRG could have its own "plug-and-play modality," including transportation, medicine or civil engineering, she said.

"Right now at the state level . . . there are a great many geographically separated units, or little pockets of mission capability that are unique and specialized like combat communications [and] electronic engineering," Hickey told ITAF. "You need a little more centralized advocacy and leadership and force projection communication capability to either move the combatant commander forward in a war fight . . . or to a homeland defense arena where the combatant commander is the governor, or, if it's further required," the U.S. Northern Command chief, the one-star said.

She said a working group of representatives from across the Air Force that will add new missions to the service's Future Total Force roadmap this week will examine which enclaved installations should be used to test the effort. -- Martin Matishak

Local News Articles

Ellington Field might be getting second chance

Hurricane Rita rocked East Texas and menaced Houston, but it also may have helped historic Ellington Field get a second chance after being hard-hit by the just-concluded base closure round.

San Antonio Express-News (San Antonio, TX)
Sig Christenson
October 17, 2005

The National Guard's commander said he'd push for Ellington — home to astronauts during NASA's glory days — to get an array of new missions to replace the expected loss of 17 F-16C fighters there by decade's end.

Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum contended homeland defense issues got short shrift as guard units

were ordered to shutter or downsize and said if Ellington "is strategic in the eyes of the governor, it is strategic to me."

"Unless the BRAC language becomes law and precludes me from putting the right capabilities in Ellington to be useful to homeland defense and future support to homeland security operations, I intend to (expand) Ellington's capability to respond in the future for those kinds of roles," he told the San Antonio Express-News.

The battle to save Ellington, a city-run facility 15 miles south of downtown Houston, goes back decades. Now used by the military, NASA and civilian air carriers, Ellington was deactivated in 1920 and used only for practice landings by pilots at Kelly Field in San Antonio. It was resurrected in World War II and designated an Air Force base in 1947 but was handed over to the city in 1984.

Just how important Ellington is became clear in the days after the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, commonly called BRAC, in late August stripped the installation of its famed 147th Fighter Wing — the unit in which President Bush flew as a young Air National Guard officer.

The base, which will lose 500 personnel from the wing as part of the realignment order, emerged as a hub of rescue and recovery activity in the wake of Rita. Army and Coast Guard helicopters took off and landed, while F-16C Fighting Falcons scrambled twice — once for a tour of the region by Bush.

"One of the biggest learning points about these two operations, Rita and Katrina, for the Houston area is the need for a robust military presence somewhere in Southeast Texas along the western Gulf Coast that has the capability to respond both on surface, air and water," said wing chief Col. Lanny McNeely, who noted Ellington's resources made it a logical site for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies.

Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Sue Ellen Turner, a BRAC commissioner from San Antonio, said the National Guard has "some latitude" to modify its bases, and she expects Blum and others will look at the issue in light of this year's storm season.

"A quick-response staging area," she added, "certainly would be a valuable asset."

Gov. Rick Perry believes Ellington is a "vital strategic facility" given its proximity to the coastal petrochemical industry, and the region's ports, which have been used for commercial and military shipping, said his spokesman Robert Black.

The Texas Guard's commander, Maj. Gen. Charles G. Rodriguez, called Ellington a "strategic" installation with "all the kinds of things that will allow for expansion" and contingency operations.

He said the facility would undergo a transformation — not be eliminated — but that "if it were to disappear, it would be a huge loss."

Big changes are coming to Texas and the nation's 53 other National Guard organizations as a result of this year's BRAC.

Ellington and other guard bases will lose aging fighters as the Air Force dramatically reduces the number of planes in its inventory to cut costs and make room for the F-22 Raptor.

The jet, touted for its stealth, speed and survivability in penetrating sophisticated enemy air defenses, is troubled by its high cost.

The Texas Guard's 88 armories will be cut in half under this year's base closure blueprint, with the oldest and most inefficient facilities in remote parts of the state shuttering.

Armed Forces Reserve Centers to be built after 2010 would replace those facilities and house troops from the Guard, the Navy, Marines and Army Reserve.

Ellington is pegged to become home to a new Reserve Center that will replace a facility now housing the Army and Marine Reserve. There is talk of adding other units to the Ellington center, which Rodriguez said would be among the first built.

"There's keen interest to get that one up and going soon," said Rodriguez, former chief fundraiser for the University of Texas Health Science Center.

Ellington hosted the Army, Marines and Coast Guard as Texas and Louisiana responded to Rita recovery operations, said Lt. Col. Karl Schmidt, an installation spokesman. Around 2,000 people worked there at its peak, including a Texas Guard mini-MASH unit staffed by about 70 airmen from nine states.

Despite the apparent failure of Perry and Bayou City leaders to persuade the BRAC commission to spare Ellington's fighters, the wing's Schmidt said the issue might not be quite settled. The Air Force had planned to retire the F-16s by 2011, but a Pentagon BRAC recommendation called for eliminating them in 2007.

The commission's language, however, is "fuzzy" on the issue, Schmidt said, explaining that wording referring to the 2007 phase-out was not in the panel's final report.

Now that new Air Force leadership is in place, there's hope for modifying the decision on the F-16s, he said, adding, "We're being told 'Semper Gumby.' Just be flexible."

Yet even if the wing is phased out in the next few years as expected, only half its 1,000 military and civilian personnel will be lost. They'll be offset by the arrival of 350 to 400 people assigned to Predator operations.

Pilots guiding the long-range reconnaissance plane in Houston will be part of Air Expeditionary Force units that rotate periodically overseas, but most often will train and fly the drones in Texas.

UH-60 Black Hawk and AH-64A Apache helicopters flown by the Texas Army National Guard will remain at Ellington, despite the 147th Fighter Wing's exit.

Blum said Ellington, which has runways that are 8,500 and 9,000 feet, has room to expand beyond the missions now planned — especially given the region's security needs.

"I would say it would be a good candidate to be putting in what we call combat expeditionary groups, which have communications, medical, engineering, transportation, security forces," he said, adding that it also would be a "superb candidate for a light cargo aircraft, something like a small version of a C-130 that would be highly useful for homeland defense and homeland security operations."

Bottling The BRAC Potion Governor's commission a good start toward making Team Connecticut permanent.

New London Day (New London, CT)
October 17, 2005

One of the lessons learned in the fight to save the submarine base was that good things happen when the state and the region work together. That spirit of cooperation ought to continue, and that's why Gov. M. Jodi Rell's plan to form an economic commission in the aftermath of BRAC is a good idea.

The commission should become a forum in which the region's leaders, congressional offices and state can continue the collaboration that took place in the BRAC fight.

The intent of the commission, among other things, is to look at ways to prevent another attempt at closing the base by improving conditions here for the Navy. U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons has proposed a similar effort. Another goal will be to explore ways to diversify the economy, also an important goal. The disaster scenario from closing the submarine base painted by Connecticut in the BRAC hearings suggests that the regional economy needs significant bolstering.

What Gov. Rell and her staff will learn, however, is that the region is mobilizing to carry out some of the same work on its own through its regional agencies, the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, and Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments and Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut.

There is a need to bring together the “team,” but not a need to reinvent the wheel with regard to economic planning.

The BRAC fight demonstrated the value of coordinated work by the state, region and congressional offices. That's the potion that ought to be bottled, and the governor's commission is a good start in that direction. The approach has great promise as long as everyone is treated as an equal, and this doesn't become a case of “We're from the state and we're here to help you.” That's the way it used to be, before BRAC.

Sub Base Fight Highlights Region's Strengths And Needs

New London Day (New London, CT)
 Greg Stone
 October 16, 2005

After the sprawling, 1,800-acre Lowry Air Force Base near Denver closed in 1994, the region around the base united and the following decade redeveloped the base into a thriving community of homes and businesses that contributes more to the local economies than the base did.

Could Southeastern Connecticut have managed the same success if the submarine base were to have been closed?

Probably not, the way the region is organized for economic development today.

While the Denver area was redeveloping Lowry, the former Norwich Hospital in Norwich and Preston, the shuttered Naval Undersea Warfare Center in New London and decommissioned Seaside Regional Center on Waterford's Long

Island Sound waterfront have remained undeveloped.

Without the immediate threat of a base closing, there appears to be little will to change the way economic development is managed. Towns will continue competing for developers to sustain their property-tax bases rather than cooperate.

Most of the leaders at a forum at The Day earlier this month on economic development after the the last round of base closings acknowledged they probably won't radically change the way they go after new business, at least until the state reforms its tax system.

But the view wasn't unanimous.

Thomas A. Sheridan, president of the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, argued that the region's failure to develop the Norwich Hospital property and surplus state land in Waterford was evidence of the need for a stronger organization to carry out economic development.

And Thomas Marano, an economic development expert for Northeast Utilities who has studied regions where large military bases had closed, said that the successes he observed resulted from strong regional leadership. He cited the example of Lowry, which was closed in 1994 and today is a thriving community of new businesses, residential developments and educational institutions. The plan produced more prosperity for the area than the base had, he said. But before that could happen, neighboring communities had to bury their differences and cooperate, he said. It took strong leadership.

Sheridan speculated that this region could not have pulled off the Lowry project, which was completed in about the same time as Norwich Hospital has been on the market.

“Certainly the BRAC (Base Closing and Realignment) process is a superb example of what we can do. We left our politics at the door. But there are other examples of poor leadership. Norwich Hospital is one example. Twelve years and millions of dollars lost,” he said.

New London City Manager Richard Brown also articulated the need for regional leadership, the kind, he said, that would “create a process in which the people of Preston feel a kinship with the people of New London.”

But they were in the minority. More people in the room, including many leaders from southeastern Connecticut's regional organizations, felt that the existing network of organizations is equal to the task of carrying out the ambitious long-range goals of their economic plan without any major changes.

Groton Town Manager Mark Oefinger is one of the leaders who would have had to contend with redeveloping the submarine base if it had closed. He acknowledged this task would have been difficult under the existing system. But he argued that it is premature to create a new organization before the region identifies economic development projects it wants to attack regionally.

“Let's identify two to four regionally significant projects and talk about what we can do. Focusing on organization is going about things backwards. We shouldn't focus on who's in charge. We need to figure out first what the region needs,” he said.

Nicholas H. Mullane II, the first selectman of North Stonington and chairman of the board of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, was more emphatically against changing the system. His organization and the region's Council of Governments were perfectly capable of carrying out the plan, he said. And besides that, as long as the state legislature avoided the issue of property tax reform, regional collaboration on economic development projects would remain largely out of reach.

“We should take advantage of the system we've got and maximize it. There's leadership, there's cooperation here.”

Richard Erickson, the planner behind creation of the Council of Governments, and chairman of the committee in charge of implementing the

regional economic development plan, also urged caution.

“We need to consider things carefully before we create another economic development authority,” he said.

In many successful regions in the country, economic development is the province of chambers of commerce or economic development organizations such as SeCTer. SeCTer was created after the earlier round of base closings in the early 1990s. That was also a time when the state began distributing economic development funds through regional organizations such as the Council of Governments. Some of these funds went to the failed OceanQuest project in New London.

But SeCTer has had limited resources with which to take a prominent lead in economic development.

And while the chamber Sheridan heads is the only regional chamber, it remains one among several that operate in their own spheres of influence. Brown said he didn't think it ought to be in the lead of economic development because it was a membership organization of businesses and not more broad-based.

On the other hand, the SeCTer board is a Who's Who of regional leaders, from business to the arts, culture and social services.

A good part of the leadership that fought off the submarine base closure came from these two organizations. Both Sheridan and SeCTer Executive Director John Markowicz were in the forefront of that campaign and Markowicz's photo in the newspaper became a trademark for the BRAC fight. And as both first selectmen Robert Congdon of Preston and Wayne Fraser of East Lyme pointed out, the Council of Governments has become in its short lifetime a proving ground for regional leadership.

But the leaders, including Sheridan, agreed that carrying this network of regional organizations to the next level, at which it could do what cities and towns currently do on their own to promote

economic development, is constrained by state laws.

Still, nobody is really in charge.

Even though the fortunes of towns are connected, you would never know it, stated William Sheehan, who has served in a variety of volunteer government roles in Waterford. The towns, competing for businesses that bring in property taxes, plan for their development and zone their land on their own.

“Our structures of government can't work together without a formal agreement,” he said.

The leaders talked about their successes in forging regional agreements, such as in supplying water. Towns cooperate in purchasing goods and providing some services. The legislature has passed laws that permit them to share in the operation and revenues of industrial parks. But economic development, tied as it has been to property taxes, has remained largely outside the realm of regional management even in cases such as Norwich Hospital when the impact is felt by the entire area.

Congdon, of Preston, chafes at the idea posed by leaders like Ledyard Mayor Susan Mendenhall of Ledyard, who wants to treat properties such as the former hospital campus as “regional assets, in which towns share the cost of developing the property, but also the resulting tax revenues.

The development of waterfront property occupied by Seaside Regional Center remained in Waterford's hands after the center was closed by the state. Even the decommissioned Naval Undersea Warfare Center in New London was redeveloped as a local asset.

The limitations upon regional development are compounded by other problems confronting development in southeastern Connecticut: a shortage of affordable housing and labor, increasingly crowded highways and, in the case of the pharmaceutical industry that is supposed to be one of the pillars of the local economy, the absence of a medical research university or

hospital. Janet Pearce, president of the United Way of Southeastern Connecticut, described a lack of focus on social services.

If anything stood out about the BRAC fight for the group, it seemed to be the spirit of cooperation that was displayed. Alice Fitzpatrick, president of the Community Foundation of Southeastern Connecticut, noted:

“One of the building blocks is a sense of good will. There are a lot of people here who want to make the place better. They are looking for the opportunity. Of the city-states in Italy that survived, they were the ones that had choral societies and such things.”

Donna Simpson, executive director of the Connecticut Convention and Visitors Bureau, suggested that the process of reaching a more effective level of organization would be slow.

“We need some small successes in the wake of BRAC to show that we can work together. We need to get small things done and if we do, we can do some of the bigger things. There are lot of places that don't have shared values.”

BRAC Victory Should Offer The Model For Teamwork

New London Day (New London, CT)
Thomas E. Marano
October 16, 2005

With the threatened loss of the submarine base past, will southeastern Connecticut wait for the next crisis before it cooperates regionally again? Will we return to “business-as-usual,” where local “home rule” regularly trumps regional cooperation? Will the area continue to rely on a fickle defense industry, casinos and the tenuous presence of one pharmaceutical giant to keep its economy afloat?

Or, seriously try to diversify?

These questions will soon be answered as the region begins to consider its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. Regional economic development ought to be the new

standard, before local problems again push regional cooperation to the backburner.

Given its new life, southeastern Connecticut must take advantage of the opportunity it has. A region that stood unified in the face of economic disaster can ride the wave of cooperation into a new era, one in which towns work together for the common good. While respecting the role of local autonomy, it needs to build bridges to solve regional problems, just as it has done over the last 18 months developing the region's CEDS and saving the submarine base.

Five key fundamentals can help usher in this new era: leadership, vision, consensus, planning and persistence. These elements have fueled economic transformation in regions across the country, helping them to overcome infighting between towns, counties and the state to create better places to live.

It all starts with leadership. Leadership has brought Southeastern Connecticut through this latest crisis to where it is now poised to execute a carefully designed economic development strategy. That same leadership must ensure the wave of cooperation does not break on the shores of Long Island Sound before the economic benefits from the strategy are realized.

A recent textbook case is the redevelopment of the former Lowry Air Force Base, which straddled Denver and Aurora, Colo. The 1,800-acre base was closed by the Pentagon in 1994. Though a regional asset, it would have been easy for the two communities to each claim its part of the base under “home rule” and go their separate ways, competing for development. This was not the case.

Prior to its closing, the mayors of Denver and Aurora signed an intergovernmental agreement to redevelop the base. To speed matters, Aurora's mayor offered to take a subordinate position to Denver's mayor. The two worked in tandem to form the Lowry Economic Recovery Project, governed by a 14-member board of directors and a 40-member community advisory committee. Board and committee members came from all walks of life and different perspectives,

but shared one goal: redevelop the base in the fastest and best way possible.

It took 18 months, hundreds of public meetings and the involvement of more than 1,000 citizens to adopt a vision for Lowry as a “place for people to live, learn, work and play for generations to come.”

Eleven years later, in the same time that the Norwich Hospital property has sat vacant, Lowry is 80 percent developed with more than 4,000 housing units valued from \$1 million to housing for the homeless. It has more than 2 million square feet of commercial space occupied by 100 firms that employ 6,500, nearly the total of pre-base-closing employment. According to one study, the redevelopment has had a \$4 billion regional economic impact.

Lowry's success took the strong leadership of two mayors and the patience to work for many months to agree on what the former base should be. It took years to develop a master plan that would create the place people envisioned. And, it has taken persistence to see the plan through and keep Lowry's people involved and engaged in a deliberate development process.

How does southeastern Connecticut compare? The region today is more diversified than it was in the 1990s. But, of the three pillars that support the region's economy – the Navy, Pfizer and the gaming industry — only the casinos need to be here.

Meanwhile, leadership is vested in several regional groups: the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, and the Eastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce. The region's vision is articulated in its recently developed CEDS — “Promote balanced, diversified, and sustainable regional economic growth that produces shared prosperity, encourages continuous individual achievement, and conserves our existing natural resources.” The plan was developed with the consensus of more than 200 people from 150 different organizations. The region's CEDS has five overall goals with 25 strategies and nearly 70

action steps assigned to several regional development agencies.

The region has all the pieces in place. But will southeastern Connecticut show the persistence necessary to execute its plan? Can 21 towns, SeCTeR, SCCOG and the regional chamber work together well enough and long enough to see it through? The CEDS Implementation Committee needs to effectively rally the region around its vision. Towns need to work together (and with the state) to fund the key activities outlined in the plan, using creative financing mechanisms like pooling resources for certain redundant services. Regional leaders need to create lasting links with the rest of Connecticut and neighboring Rhode Island, which shares its interstate economy and work force.

The region has the chance to set a new state standard of regional cooperation and economic progress. If it happens, great rewards await. If not, the next round of BRAC lurks.

Opinions/ Editorials

It's Important To Learn From Our Failures

New London Day (New London, CT)
Thomas A. Sheridan
October 16, 2005

The region united to fight the threatened closure of the sub base. It's a wonderful example of what can be accomplished when a group of citizens with strong leadership and determination devote themselves to the common good of the region.

So, how we can build upon that spirit of cooperation, with its energy and organization? What can we capture from that experience? How can this model be used to help avoid the dysfunctions that have plagued the well-intentioned efforts to redevelop significant properties in our region such as the former Norwich Hospital in Preston and Norwich and the former Seaside Regional Center in Waterford?

The latest blueprint to build a healthy and diversified economy in the region, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for eastern Connecticut, states as its first goal that the region must promote effective ways to enhance collaboration around economic development and unites the region around a common cause. As in the BRAC efforts, we must find ways to engage the most talented and experienced people in economic development. We must put aside our parochial and political differences and learn to work in the interest of the entire region.

Something is amiss in our current system that has prevented the Norwich Hospital property from being redeveloped for 12 years. This failure has resulted in the loss of corporate, state and property-tax revenue from this prime piece of property, \$3.5 million spent by the state to attract a developer, and the ongoing security and maintenance costs. These numbers add up to a staggering liability for state taxpayers. We must also add to this the significant loss of jobs to the region and the ongoing liability for taxpayers.

Similar failures have plagued the redevelopment of the Seaside Regional Center in Waterford. This valuable piece of state surplus property, offered to and rejected by the town, has been slated for development for the past 10 years. Development has stalled while the state continues to absorb the ongoing security, maintenance, liability and environmental costs. Again the loss of property-tax revenue for the town and the ongoing liability for the taxpayer adds up to another significant financial burden for the taxpayer. Surely we can agree that the current process for redeveloping state surplus property is ineffective. Imagine on top of this if we were confronted with redeveloping the Naval Submarine Base.

Needed: Incentives to cooperate

The BRAC fight showed we can do better at working together. But in order to do so we need strong state leadership with incentives to cooperate. As it is, we have 22 independent and competing local governments in eastern Connecticut looking out for the interests of

260,000 people. Each town derives its authority from the state legislature.

Over the years the legislature has enacted enabling legislation which allows, but does not require, towns to work together in the best interests of participating communities.

Some of our communities, through support and encouragement of the Regional Council of Governments, have made use of this enabling legislation in less politically charged and non-confrontational areas such as the regional water, bulk purchasing and transportation. Attempts have been made over the years to pass legislation that would require communities to share resources. These efforts have failed because of the lack of incentives and political will.

The time has come for our state legislature to enact legislation that not only allows, but requires, a regional approach to appropriately develop surplus state properties and otherwise collaborate on economic development.

We need a law that requires experienced representation from the private and government sector and the surrounding communities to redevelop state surplus properties. The legislation also should require citizen participation and judicial review of the planning process if necessary. The same efficiencies should be required for other essential public services such as legislation that requires regional 911 systems rather than the patch-work system that presently exists.

A new and different approach to large-scale regional redevelopment of publicly owned property is necessary if we are to manage the public's interest in a timely and responsible manner. The power to change the existing dysfunctional process rests with the state legislature. Such reform would transform surplus properties, such as the Norwich Hospital and Seaside Regional Center properties, from being perennial liabilities to being tax-paying, job-creating resources for the entire region.

As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has so skillfully discussed in his recent book, "The World is Flat," we can no longer afford to delude ourselves with our parochial sense of independence and self-sustainability. We are far more interconnected with both ideas and workers at local and international level than we ever dreamed possible.

To stand a chance in this new world of international relationships in commerce, we must begin to break through local resistance to shared efforts and efficiencies. The leadership of the state must facilitate this process with appropriate financial help to communities which plan and act regionally.

When we banded together to keep the submarine base here, we did what we should be doing routinely. It was a wonderful accomplishment, an example of democracy at its best. For us to be successful we had to set aside politics and parochialism, concentrate on a focused strategy and involve the public and private sectors. We need to bottle that spirit while it is still fresh.

Additional Notes