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Military, communities struggle with mutual 'encroachment' issues

BY BECKY IANNOTTA

Citizen Staff

KEY WEST — A resort town that depends on tourists and a military installation to sustain its economy wants to capitalize on skyrocketing housing values by building homes on some of the area's remaining vacant land.

But there's a hitch: The military considers development of that vacant land incompatible with fighter jet flight training that takes place at a nearby airfield.

It's a scenario unfolding in the Keys as the Navy updates its aircraft noise and accident-potential zone maps, but it is not unique.

Communities near Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Va., Eglin Air Force Base in the Panhandle and Luke Air Force Base near Phoenix are among the communities nationwide that are struggling with the question: How can we encourage nearby military installations, which bring jobs and business to our communities, to remain in place without denying property owners the ability to build on their land?

"Virginia Beach is very pro-military. We have a lot of active-duty personnel and families here, and we have a lot of retired military living here," said Bob Matthias, Virginia Beach assistant city manager. "We're very supportive of the Navy, it's just that they're creating issues for us."

Virginia Beach residents and NAS Oceana are caught up in lawsuits and negotiations over where new development and redevelopment of old homes can take place without hampering training for pilots.

The situation at Oceana is an example of a deteriorating relationship between the Navy and community over development

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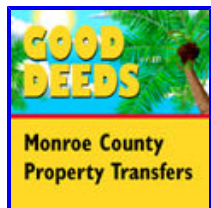
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that occurred without good planning, said Capt. Jim Scholl, commanding officer of Naval Air Station Key West. It's the type of communication breakdown he hopes to avoid when working with Keys officials on land use and zoning surrounding the airfield at Boca Chica.

"It's not understanding the potential impacts of not being careful about land use," Scholl said.

Stopping sprawl

Bases across the country are battling encroachment, a word used by the military to describe the buildup of housing, hospitals, schools and other facilities that draw large numbers of people and are considered inappropriate around boundaries of bases.

"If down the road it looks like there's going to be more encroachment, we want to stop it now," said Glenn Flood, spokesman for the Defense Department.

There are several ideas for stopping encroachment, from buying up land around bases to a land-swapping proposal favored by some farmers near Luke Air Force Base in Arizona.

At air bases like Naval Air Station Key West, computer models are used to create maps illustrating which areas are most affected by jet noise and potential accidents, with recommendations about what types of development, if any, should occur in those areas.

The maps are called Air Installations Compatibility Use Zones, or AICUZ, and they are tools for local planners to use when deciding where and what type of development should occur.

Some states, including Florida, are requiring counties and cities to adopt military planning and zoning recommendations into their land-use plans. The Florida Legislature passed a law last year mandating all local governments amend their plans governing land use by June 30, 2006, to reflect military recommendations.

Local governments in Arizona adopted zoning around Luke Air Force Base that is more stringent than requested in the AICUZ for that base, said Mary Jo May, spokeswoman for Luke Air Force Base. The Arizona Legislature passed a law last year prohibiting development inside any noise contours — areas most affected by jet noise according to the AICUZ maps.

"We have a Community Initiatives team that does absolutely nothing all day long but work with local developers, planners, county and state leaders," May said. Every planning or zoning issue in the 11 cities surrounding the base must have a comment from one of the four-member Community Initiatives team before being approved by the cities' political leaders, she said.

All Air Force F-16 pilots train at Luke before being assigned to a squadron, and Air Force officials believe the surrounding

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communities appreciate the base's \$1.4-billion annual contribution to the local economy and take pride in being a primary force in pilot training.

As evidence, May points to a voluntary effort by developers to follow a graduated plan for development that places fewer homes and other heavily populated facilities in areas near the base and allows apartments, condo complexes and other heavily used developments farther away.

"They don't build high-density right next to noise contours," she said. "And the developers are volunteering to do this."

But not everyone is happy with the growth limitations around Luke Air Force Base, Maricopa County Supervisor Don Stapely told USA Today in an article appearing on Feb. 2. "Frankly, there has been an argument that if Luke were closed, it would be better for our economy because of the value of the land," he said.

Training adjustments

In Virginia Beach, negotiations over appropriate uses for land around the main airfield and two others nearby can be traced back to letters Navy officials wrote in the 1960s, said Raymond Firenze, AICUZ officer for Naval Air Station Oceana.

"Against all our wishes, they've allowed all this residential growth right up to our fences," he said. "Less than 3 miles from the busiest runways, they approved a high-end luxury condo complex."

The Navy hired Firenze to work with the community on AICUZ issues, and the base's Web site has comparisons of noise at different levels and damage it can cause, the number of noise complaints received each year and phone numbers to call.

The entire AICUZ is online, along with a list of military aircraft flown around Virginia Beach.

Some of those aircraft have altered their training to avoid creating too much noise in Virginia Beach neighborhoods, Firenze said.

Navy F/A-18s and F-14 pilots practice aircraft carrier landings at the Oceana and nearby Fentress air fields, but their practice landings do not mirror carrier landings. Normally, fighter jets drop their landing gear about 600 feet from the carrier, but pilots practicing in Virginia Beach begin preparing for landing farther out — 1,000 feet at Oceana and 800 feet at Fentress — to limit some of the noise near the airfields.

"We like to train for the real thing. Unfortunately, we can't because of encroachment," Firenze said. "These restrictions are self-imposed. This is an olive branch to the community. We do it as good neighbors."

BRAC 2005



Among the consequences of allowing growth to close in on a military base is the potential limitation of training operations and inability of the base to grow, which could make it vulnerable to closure or downsizing.

The fifth round of the Base Realignment and Closure process takes place this year, and all bases are under review, according to the Defense Department's Web site.

The nine-member commission nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate will spend the summer reviewing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's recommendations for closure. The commission will forward its recommendations to the president by Sept. 23, and Congress must approve or reject the list in its entirety.

"I think every time there's base realignment and closure, every base gets nervous," Firenze said, as he listed positive aspects that should play in Oceana's favor, like the proximity to aircraft carriers at Norfolk, being the master jet base on the East Coast that is home to F/A-18s and the remaining F-14 squadrons, good weather and strong nearby schools.

"But then you have to start wondering, 'OK, now, all of a sudden, we have encroachment and lawsuits.' We have done just about everything we can do without starting to restrict operations," he said. "You have to wonder what the decision-makers are thinking about, and that's the mystery."

The four previous BRAC rounds cut Defense Department facilities by about 20 percent and saved about \$16.7 billion once environmental cleanup is factored in and continues to save about \$7 billion each year, according to Defense Department figures.

Key West cuts

Naval Air Station Key West was targeted by the 1995 BRAC, which is how the city took ownership of Poinciana Plaza affordable apartments on Duck Avenue and the 33 acres of waterfront property at Truman Waterfront. The BRAC Commission also included the Navy Mole Pier in its 1995 recommendation approved by Congress and President Bill Clinton, but the pier was removed from the list after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. The Navy allows the city to use the pier for cruise ships, but has first dibs on docking military vessels there.

Naval Air Station Key West was downgraded to a Naval Air Facility as part of BRAC 1995, but regained its Naval Air Station designation in 2003 as the Boca Chica airfield became more popular for flight training and other operations due to closures in other parts of the country. The year-round warm weather and clear skies also draw air crews to the Keys.

Still, some community leaders worry that NAS Key West and other military facilities here could fall victim to BRAC without

aggressive efforts to preserve the community of almost 9,000 civilian and enlisted employees and their dependents and the \$463.7 million that they and the base pour into the local economy each year.

Defensive posture

Last month, local attorney David Paul Horan, who heads up the Florida Keys Defense Alliance, told county commissioners about a statewide campaign his group has joined to preserve Florida's military bases.

"May I remind you that BRAC 2005 is in full swing," he said.

The \$44-billion military and defense-related industries in Florida and the approach of BRAC 2005 led to the formation of Gov. Jeb Bush's Advisory Council on BRAC and the Florida Defense Alliance, of which Horan's group is the local chapter.

Horan said some recent discussion about NAS Key West's updated AICUZ and its possible effect on proposed development in Key Haven and Stock Island has generated bad publicity for the Navy that can be remedied if local commanders are granted flexibility when working with communities.

"Guess what, the Navy restricts the ability of commanding officers of all installations to say anything other than what is in the AICUZ," Horan said. "It makes [Capt. Scholl] look like he's against mother and apple pie, and I don't want him to be viewed that way."

Horan said Stock Island is the only place left to build affordable housing and, despite its inclusion in the aircraft noise zones, plans for development there should continue.

He believes the community will tolerate the noise and discounts "chronic complainers," whom he says made up about half of the 76 noise reports called in to the Navy in 2003.

"Once you take that out of the equation, we don't have a noise problem," he said. "We're probably the most military-friendly area in the United States."

The state recently awarded the Florida Keys Defense Alliance a \$90,000 grant, and most of it was spent hiring retired Adm. Robert Natter for consulting services, Horan said. Natter was commander of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, which included oversight of NAS Key West.

"We're working with the governor's office and with the Navy and other military commands to try to facilitate putting our best foot forward to make sure we're safe," Horan said.

Residents of Virginia Beach also are aware of the nationwide effort to scale back the number of military installations, the town's assistant city manager said.

"We are certainly concerned about the BRAC process, or that it

might be a death by a thousand papercuts" if the base were to be downgraded so much that it was no longer needed, Matthias said.

The Navy generates about \$1.1 billion in salary and benefits in Virginia Beach and spends about \$400 million, representing about one-eleventh of the economy there, Matthias said.

Getting creative

Environmentalists and military officials in the Florida Panhandle have formed an unusual alliance to preserve land that falls within the flight paths of Air Force and Navy aircraft.

Last week, Gov. Bush and the Cabinet approved spending \$16.2 million, in addition to \$1 million in federal funds, to purchase more than 17,000 acres in Northwest Florida.

The 10-mile-wide-by-100-mile-long conservation area provides critical land bridges for black bear migration, said Deborah Keller of The Nature Conservancy.

"It provides a critical linkage for black bear migration, and it helps buffer [five military installations] and keeps their flyways clear," she said.

The partnership among environmental groups, the military, state Department of Environmental Protection and other state and federal agencies is part of an initiative President George Bush introduced in December 2002, said Jesse Borthwick, Greenway manager for Eglin Air Force Base.

Bush and Congress budgeted \$12.5 million this year to buy buffer lands around military installations, and next year's federal budget request — to be released today — will include \$20 million more as part of the Comprehensive Land Use Initiative, said Glenn Flood of the Defense Department.

"The overarching policy is we would like more buffer zones to protect the environment and try to reduce encroachment," Flood said. "Protecting the environment is essential for all of us. It also is key because we don't want to be bad neighbors. It goes hand-in-hand with readiness."

Development has not occurred as rapidly in Northwest Florida as it has in other parts of the state, Borthwick said, but planned communities were beginning to spring up, which caused concern about Eglin's half-million-acre land range and the airspace used daily for low-level flights and training missions.

"What would happen if a retirement community was built under flight space?" he asked. "The problem is future incompatible development, and when that happens, we'd have to change the way we operate."

Keller said that military installations "have a huge percentage of endangered species" and that the bases adhere to federal endangered species laws.

Keeping the black bear species healthy is in everyone's best interest, Borthwick said.

"We would rather not see the black bear become an endangered species because we want to be good stewards, but we don't want to have to tiptoe around another endangered species," he said.

Keller and Borthwick acknowledged the unlikely partnership between environmental groups and the military, but said the more they worked together, the more common ground they found.

For somewhat different reasons, both want to create conservation areas that prohibit development.

"Obviously, the Defense Department has become more aware of encroachment as an issue they should pay attention to," Keller said.

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