

Emerald Coast weighs pros and cons of Joint Strike Fighter, Special Forces missions

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If it had been any other media teleconference about any other new installation, the sigh of relief would have been deafening. Although Florida's unemployment rate is at 7 percent and the housing market is in a slump, the Emerald Coast was guaranteed more than 6,000 new residents when the Army 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) arrives at Eglin Air Force Base.

So, why the long faces? The announcement Nov. 21 of a signed Record of Decision for the Special Forces Group was overshadowed by the news that the Record of Decision for the Joint Strike Fighter training school has been delayed until early next year.

Both missions are expected to have a substantial impact on Okaloosa, Walton and Santa Rosa counties. But without a Record of Decision, plans to bring the F-35 and the Joint Strike Fighter training mission are unclear. The airfields that will be used, the cantonment sites and even the number of aircraft that will come to Eglin are up in the air.

Holding pattern

Until two Records of Decision are signed, communities likely to be affected are in a holding pattern on how to plan for the possible 3,900 people who will come with the Joint Strike Fighter mission. The decision was delayed because Valparaiso's concerns about noise. The Air Force's initial runway suggestions for the noisy F-35s would affect thousands of the town's residents.

Kathleen Ferguson, deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, said additional steps will be taken to mitigate the noise. The Air Force plans to look at the problem over the next year. The first Record of Decision for the mission will be signed in a few months to ensure the \$250 million allocated for construction at Eglin is not forfeited and the first F-35s can be delivered in March 2010. However, it is unclear whether the decision will provide enough details to allow local governments to prepare for the mission.

After a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, another Record of Decision will be issued in late 2010. "It's really an incremental approach to decision making," Ferguson said.

Military communities have been posturing to fight for their missions and installations since 2003, when plans for Base Realignment and Closure were announced. With four recommendations that included two major installations, Eglin won the battle. Because of aging aircraft, the base will still lose airmen in coming years as the 33rd Fighter Wing transitions into the Joint Strike Fighter training school. However, the delays mean preparations for the new mission in surrounding municipalities have been shelved.

"We have been basically on hold since July," said Jeff Fanto, who heads the Eglin Installation Growth committee and the Tri-County Joint Land Use Study. The group will compile an impact assessment on roads and transportation, land use, housing, infrastructure, utilities, economy,

health services, education and quality of life. However, "without having the Air Force's definitive answer on the F-35, that will affect (the completion of) our study," Fanto said.

Opportunities and challenges

The Army will begin relocating 2,200 soldiers and 4,600 family members from Fort Bragg, N.C., to Eglin in late spring. The move will continue through 2011 and is expected to have the greatest impact on north Okaloosa County and west Walton County, said Mike Coup, chief deputy for the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, who is helping gauge the impact of the Special Forces Group as a member of Eglin's Installation Growth Committee.

Plans for the Joint Strike Fighter are expected to be more complicated. The school will evolve from a small operation to train F-35 instructors to a full school with more than 500 students each year. The school is expected to have 113 F-35s to train the first wave of fighter pilots, who will come from the Air Force, Navy, Marines and at least seven countries.

The Emerald Coast stands to gain millions of dollars from the school. When the F-35 school is in place completely, local schools stand to gain additional \$10.6 million in revenue. The mission also is expected to create 2,326 direct jobs and an additional 1,322 induced positions.

The numbers are even greater for the 7th Special Forces Group. More than 1,200 new jobs will be created and schools will see an additional \$14.8 million. "The ripple effect is huge," said Larry Sassano, president of the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County.

Generally, for every dollar generated by an industry, Sassano has found that \$1 or \$2 is generated indirectly. In the case of the Air Force, the ratio is \$4.50 to \$5 brought into the local economy. "That's something you don't realize or you don't visibly see until more cars start getting purchased, more homes start getting purchased, more retail sales are made," said Sassano. "That's a gradual thing that I think will happen here once some of those construction dollars are released."

Sassano sees Eglin's two new installations as a perfect balance. The F-35 school will improve the economy over time and generate high-end technical jobs and the Special Forces 7th will have an immediate impact. "Those construction dollars will start flowing into the northern part of the county, but that will impact the entire region because of the amount of those dollars," he said. "That's exciting because it's going to happen right away and that'll start stimulating the economy in terms of schools, in terms of houses, rental property, appliances and so on. That's now. That's something to get excited about now."

However, the new missions have their issues. Okaloosa County predicts about 2,500 BRAC-related construction vehicles per day will hit the roads through 2011. The full build-out of the Special Forces will bring an additional 7,187 average daily trips on State Road 85. The traffic impact from the Joint Strike Fighter mission still is unknown, which means planning and funding to upgrade infrastructure (normally a three- to five-year process) has not begun. The traffic will not end with construction. The Joint Strike Fighter mission will bring 2,326 personnel to the area. Family members bring the total to nearly 5,000.

Funding to ease traffic is incomplete. Road projects, normally years in the works, have been pushed into overdrive to accommodate the new Army installation. Without having concrete information on the F-35 school, county officials may face the same setbacks.

Being heard above the noise

Traffic is a mere molehill compared to the mountain of noise concerns Valparaiso officials have raised over the F-35 school. According to the Environmental Impact Statement released in October, nearly 7,000 residents will be exposed to noise levels above 65 decibels if proposed alternatives for the F-35's runways are selected. More than 1,300 in Valparaiso would have noise levels above 80 decibels.

The city has filed a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against the Air Force to obtain information - specifically noise tests - and has hired lawyers to fight any Record of Decision that would raise noise levels for residents. "They're not the only alternatives. There's more," Mayor Bruce Arnold said of the proposed runways.

Arnold wants to be a part of the Air Force's decision-making process to get "iron-clad guarantees" that the F-35 school will not be built at the expense of Valparaiso residents. "I've asked verbally and I've asked by letter that we be allowed to sit down with decision-makers," he said.

Ferguson, deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, said the delay in signing the Record of Decision will be used to find answers to Valparaiso's noise concerns while ensuring the facilities, infrastructure and ability to operate the F-35 school are in place. Next fall's supplemental Environmental Impact Statement could suggest new runway alternatives or fewer than the expected 113 aircraft - and fewer jobs. However, Air Force officials would not entertain that possibility.

"As we have the goal to bed down 113, there is no need at this time to discuss limits," said Gary T. Strasburg, the Air Force's chief of environmental public affairs.

An economy in the balance

Despite the slow, uneasy process of obtaining the BRAC installations, the Emerald Coast welcomes the new additions. Even Arnold has said his city would be proud to be the home of the Joint Strike Fighter. Other communities have put their support in writing.

"All of the other municipalities - Crestview, Niceville, Shalimar, Fort Walton Beach, Destin, Okaloosa County Government, Walton County, Santa Rosa County, Bay County - support the F-35 and every single one of these communities will benefit from the F-35 coming here," said Kay Rasmussen, the EDC's director of defense and economic initiatives.

And the Air Force has no plans to move the mission. "As was stated by Ms. Ferguson, the goal is to bed down 113 aircraft at Eglin and we are not looking to move the JSF to another base," said Strasburg. Military construction is poised to begin early next year. That couldn't come at a better time.

"We've already started incurring a downturn in our population because of the 33rd Fighter Wing and the F-15 leaving," said Rasmussen. "They are retiring that 30-year-old plane just like they retired 8 track tape music players. We now have CDs."

The fighter wing in October 2009 will become the Air Education and Training Command unit that operates the F-35 training center. Rasmussen predicts a continued economic hardship in the coming years as more than 2,207 F-15 personnel lose their positions.

"By the end of next year and the beginning of 2010, we will have a drop of over 3,000 people in our community, so that's going to be devastation to everybody - all of the municipalities - because those are people that live in our community. They go shopping. They go to theaters. Their houses - whether they own houses or rent them - will be sitting empty," she said. "It is a huge economic devastation if we do not replenish that population. The F-35 is the replenishment of that population and it was planned that way.

"So, despite the controversies going on about the sound of the plane - which is true, it is louder - we need to have that plane here for our economic vitality," she added. "If it does not come here, we will have devastation across our region."

Rasmussen worries that the delays in the Environmental Impact Statement process will be felt in Okaloosa County for years to come.

"It's a big delay and it's a big thing to us because the delay was incurred because of publicized negativity about the plane coming here and that's not a good thing," she said. "A community has raised its head and it has voiced its opinions concerning this. Unfortunately, that's what's been publicized. That's what has gone out to the media, military leaders and Congress."