

Reflections of a Base Commander: Lessons Learned on Managing Encroachment and Community Partnerships

Military installation staffs are faced with daily challenges balancing management of encroachment and incompatible land use issues, community partnerships, environmental requirements, and meeting training, testing, and operational requirements. The installation commander is the leader and decision maker who has the authority to manage the various programs and drive stakeholder engagement to resolve the tensions arising from these competing interests. By learning from commanders who have perspective dealing with encroachment issues, current and future installation and range commanders and staffs can improve their own efforts.

The following summarizes the lessons learned and discussion on working with local communities, developing REPI projects, and working with installation planning teams from the REPI Webinar - Reflections of a Base Commander (March 6, 2013), featuring:

- Col. Addison D. "Tad" Davis, IV, USA (Ret) – Garrison Commander for Fort Bragg, NC from 2000-2003.
 - Capt. Matthew E. Schellhorn, USN (Ret) – Commanding Officer for Naval Station Mayport from 2001-2004.
 - Col. Daniel J. Choike, USMC (Ret) – Commanding Officer for Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia from 2009-2012.
 - Col. Dave Belote, USAF (Ret) – Base Commander for Nellis AFB, Creech AFB, and the Nevada Test and Training Range from 2008-2010.
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Question 1: Do commanders know about encroachment problems before their command? What did they do upon learning about encroachment?

Although it's not always called "encroachment," our commanders all recognized the problem early on, even in cases where the problems stemmed from internal, BRAC-related growth. One way to make the conversation about encroachment problems more positive is to refer to "compatible development" instead. Ultimately, the most fundamental response is to build relationships, particularly with your local community and governments, and rely on staff expertise.

Question 2: Do commanders learn about encroachment in garrison commander school?

Unfortunately, garrison commander school provides minimal, if any, training related to encroachment. However, commanders can prepare themselves by proactively doing homework on the installation and its neighboring communities before beginning duty.

Commanders need to be aware of the breadth and depth of the playing field: who are the relevant stakeholders at the local, regional, and state levels? Learn as much as possible to understand the challenges and stakeholders. The expert staff or other institutions already in place are key to

getting commanders up to speed. Community Plans and Liaison Officers (CPLOs) and CPLO-like staff in place know the community and have built relationships.

Question 3: How can installation staff better equip their commanding officers?

Installation staffs should continually seek out information and knowledge to stay ahead of any development trends. At Nellis AFB, staff tried to stay ahead of the game by reviewing the agendas of the region's county and planning commissions to keep informed of possible agenda items that could impact the flow of airplanes around the base and range.

Staff can also encourage commanding officers to engage the state legislature, testify before committees, and be involved in important policy or legislative discussions. At the same time, keep in contact with the private business community, especially developers. An example of institutionalizing this type of engagement is getting the state or local governments to require contact with local installation representatives for input on missions and impacts when communities are doing any long-term planning.

Most importantly, encourage honesty and openness so that the community understands what the base is doing. In short, it's all about relationships and credibility.

Question 4: What are some of the key skills that commanders should look for in their staffs?

Though there are numerous helpful qualities, some key skills include: (1) The ability to facilitate a large group working together; (2) An understanding of long-range planning and how to integrate master plans, land use planning, range sustainability, and encroachment control plans; and (3) Experience in planning from the government or commercial sectors, which can further smooth along an installation's efforts at coordinating with relevant external stakeholders.

For example, at MCB Quantico, Col. Choike hosted a day-long table-top planning exercise, where group facilitation was a valuable asset. This exercised helped foment a collaborative atmosphere and led to the creation of the Quantico Regional Executive Steering Committee. A similar exercise with your local and regional communities could be an interesting way to advance collaboration and understanding.

Question 5: What can commanders do to take advantage of opportunities, empower their staff, and encourage them to seek innovative solutions?

There's no how-to guide; what works will vary by installation. Partnerships need to be nurtured and consistent; it's not just one or two years, it's decades of work. Community leaders know commanders will be leaving in two or three years, so it's important that staffs bring continuity to the relationships with local and regional institutions. Institutionalized working groups that know the battle rhythm of planning and community involvement can put commanders in a position to take advantage of opportunities or readily respond to emerging issues. MCB Quantico has a subgroup of planning experts tasked to address five areas: (1) understanding demographics and trends; (2) understanding economic impacts—capturing and showing the value of the installation to the community, including second and third order effects on the region; (3) transportation; (4) information sharing (including GIS); and (5) submitting requirements to OEA for a JLUS. Such a committee can focus the use of staff technical expertise, contacts, and knowledge.

New commanding officers should also look to build on the existing REPI infrastructure throughout DoD. Some commanders will benefit from their installations having established programs, like at Fort Bragg, which began its Private Lands Initiative before REPI was established. But if that's not the case, Service headquarters and OSD are available to provide education, resources, and support.

In addition, partners such as local land trusts have experience with conservation and know the community. Commanders should encourage their staffs to lean on their partners and land trusts as much as possible. Cast a wide net. One community that is not mentioned as often but can be a vital supporter is Chambers of Commerce and other business alliances. They can help tie together installations within their area of influence and they are good about community covenants. Other similar groups include associations of realtors, builders, and developers.

Question 6: With perspective over time, what kind of tools and policies are missing? What are some gaps or challenges to addressing encroachment?

In addition to focusing on land protection, DoD should continue talking to local and state governments to develop legislation and policies that address zoning and development impacts on bases, comprehensive plans, density requirements, and urban developmental area legislation. It can be difficult to get installation commanders' concerns in front of critical decision makers.

Some installations may have difficulty finding partners, especially those who can provide the additional share to meet a Service's minimum cost-share requirement (in the case of the Navy's and Marine Corps' 50% cost-share requirements). At the same time, partners think that DoD has pockets flush with funding for buffer projects. For instance, NS Mayport has had difficulty finding a partner to help protect Pinycastle Range because the community sees little economic benefit from the Navy in the surrounding Ocala National Forest area. OSD's national-level outreach role can help identify partners for struggling installations.

Maybe most importantly, the Department across the board must work to identify on a recurring basis where would the REPI program have the greatest impact based on limited resources. This includes encouraging field staff to provide recommendations and having a long-term, strategic vision even as commanders rotate out. Externally, need long-term effort focused on high priority installations and congressional districts.

OSD can also help the Services educate commanders on opportunities for REPI partnerships and community engagement through garrison commander education programs. The Army is trying to push this to installations with heavy use and important training missions. But in general DoD needs to continue promoting the best and brightest to garrison command positions and provide them with the skills to think on their feet and build relationships.

Question 7: How can commanders work on protecting away areas and "white spaces" distant from an installation, and places that may not see the economic benefit of an installation?

Engagement to protect "white spaces" under flight routes is triply important. For instance, the counties under the Nevada Test and Training Range contain all the land under the airspace, where planes flying through and create sonic booms. But this area gets none of the economic benefit that Clark County receives from the presence of Nellis AFB. Pinycastle Range has a

similar issue with its four surrounding counties. Engagement in these cases should be led by the commander and has to focus on what our servicemen and women are doing and why.

Commanders should not be afraid to go outside the gate and should arm other senior general officers that are tenants to communicate the importance of the base's mission and how it impacts national security. Use all available tools, including social media, radio, and television advertising. Make it personable.

Question 8: What is the value in working across the region, state, or across Services through a Commanders' Council?

A Commanders' Council or a similar forum is a good vehicle for speaking as one voice on compatible use and mission-related issues. North Carolina has an engaging Commanders' Council, as do a few other states. Such groups can help with outreach and even help educate the commanders about big compatibility issues that tie important, large training areas together like the Nevada Test and Training Range and R-2508 airspace complex in the Mojave region.

Question 9: What final lessons learned should commanders and their staffs know if they have not done encroachment management as a specific activity?

First and foremost, commanders need to define and articulate the impacts to the mission. Senior field officers are out there day-to-day and have a good assessment of the situation. They need to articulate potential impacts if action is not taken to the general officers who are at the senior commander level. Documents like Encroachment Action Plans (EAPs) can help in these efforts, and commanders and their staffs can always reach back for help from OSD and Service headquarters. EAPs or encroachment studies allow you to support all claims about impacts to the mission with data and documentation.

In addition, new commanders need to understand the needs and interests of stakeholders in the region: know their growth and infrastructure, the quality of life they're seeking, the tax base, what business and development groups' interests, and available conservation groups that you can partner with.

Never forget individual land owners' interests and understand that competing interests have a valid viewpoint and incentives. Commanders shouldn't be afraid of working on friction points. Stakeholders and decision makers will engage and work on such issues as long as you stay committed and continue to talk things through. Commanders also need to make sure the communities understand they are appreciated and how they contribute to the overall military mission. Family appreciation events, site visits, and other programs can help local residents and partners feel a part of the mission and see what the military does.

Last and certainly not least, be an advocate, not only for military requirements but for the efforts of the entire group, as you need to find the sweet spot between community and military mission. Managing encroachment involves decades of ongoing work. Partnerships need to be nurtured and there has to be good, solid handover to successors-in-command. Civilian staff will be key to bringing continuity to these relationships. We often talk about the need for realistic training because training is a perishable skill, but relationships are also perishable. They need to be maintained regularly. It's not an engineered solution, it's not electronic. It's deeply personal.