

Case Study: Partnering with Communities for Success

Community leaders are key partners in encouraging compatible development surrounding military installations. Without their support, installations may find their efforts ineffectual or even actively thwarted in the worst cases. Military planners at Fort Carson, Robins Air Force Base and Naval Air Station Oceana have worked hard to develop solid relationships with their communities, and that effort has proven invaluable in protecting the critical buffer regions surrounding their installations.

Background

In the 1990s forward thinkers in the Army realized that Fort Carson was going to face serious problems with incompatible development and endangered species management in the near future. Located eight miles south of Colorado Springs, the 138,000-acre installation is home to many units, including the 4th Infantry Division and the 10th Special Forces Group, with over 28,000 soldiers trained annually. In 2003 the Army developed a plan to create a contiguous 1.5 - 2 mile buffer around a significant portion of the installation's southern and eastern perimeter to protect night training and live-fire exercises. Through partnerships with The Nature Conservancy, El Paso County and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, conservation easements were placed on large portions of the buffer. With other sections dedicated to compatible uses, the only remaining area was the El Rancho housing development. Over 3,800 acres of the subdivision lie within the eastern buffer range of the installation. In collaboration with the El Paso County, the Army developed a plan to purchase empty lots and eliminate future development.

Robins Air Force Base lies 18 miles southeast of Macon, Georgia and is home to Warner Robins Air Logistics Center for the C-5, C-17, C-130 and F-15 aircrafts, the headquarters for the Air Force Reserve Command and the Joint Surveillance Aerial Reconnaissance System. Because zoning laws didn't prevent residential dwellings surrounding the base, gradually housing cropped up along the north side of the base. Planners realized that they needed to partner with local officials to limit incompatible development in this crucial area or current and future missions at the base could be adversely affected.

Located in Virginia Beach, Naval Air Station (NAS) Oceana is home to 19 strike fighter squadrons of F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets and is the only Master Jet Base on the East Coast. Despite its vital mission, Oceana, including its Auxiliary Landing Field Fentress in the nearby City of Chesapeake, is the most encroached upon naval air station in the country. Navy planners identified encroachment as a problem as far back as 1976 when they first started acquiring critical properties in fee and purchasing restrictive-use easements. Since that time development has increased rapidly as the cities habitually overruled their zoning rules for individual projects despite official Navy objections. As the population in the area grew, the Navy realized it needed serious a commitment from the cities to stop incompatible development. The issue came to a head in the 2005 when the Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) threatened to remove the Strike Fighter Wing, Atlantic to Florida. Facing the loss of over 300 planes and 15,000 people, Virginia Beach and Chesapeake were finally ready to make that commitment.

Solutions

According to Wayne Thomas, NEPA and Cultural Management Branch Chief, the key for Fort Carson was to partner with El Paso County to limit future construction of additional houses or roads in the El Rancho subdivision. Since 2005, the County has purchased over 120 lots covering over 1,000 acres at cost of \$4.1 million. The Army also purchased the water rights from the community developer, preventing the construction of additional houses. Current landowners who hadn't purchased water rights found they had no access to water and were left no choice but to haul water to their homes. "At the same time we were working with the County to limit growth, the County also started purchasing undeveloped lots in the subdivision. The subdivision road network also started to suffer as the remaining homeowners couldn't afford the maintenance. When the subdivision was created, the County never accepted responsibility for the road maintenance," Thomas notes. The Army is continuing to contact land owners in an effort to find willing sellers.

In 2004, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC) published the Joint Land Use Study, which allowed local government's planning and zoning to legally regulate the use of properties covered in the study. According to Hayden Hinton, Base Community Planner, the study identified approximately 250 parcels in the counties of South Bibb and North Houston that were located within the Air Installation Compatible Use Zones (AICUZ). These properties had an estimated value of \$30 million. The installation and MGRC jointly drafted a plan to acquire the properties and for the local governments to rezone the land to prevent future incompatible land development. Bibb and Houston Counties also both approved a sales tax, which generated \$12 million in additional revenue needed to purchase properties and place deed restrictions on them. The local Chamber of Commerce was an instrumental partner in acquisitions, paying for the appraisals on 125 properties and hiring a dedicated staff person to work directly with landowners. "By working closely with the MGRC, local governments and other stakeholders on AICUZ criteria were then able to go out among the landowners to discuss land issues with them. Meeting with these folks face-to-face was a tremendous help," says Hayden. The REPI program was important in providing a format in which the Air Force, in partnering with local communities, could purchase surrounding lands that encroached and could impede the flying missions at Robins.

Since 2006, Virginia Beach and Chesapeake have contributed over \$17 million, which has been used to match REPI funds to acquire 2,332 acres in the Inter-facility Traffic Area (ITA). According to CPLO Ray Firenze, "Since 2005 a positive, respectful relationship has been established between the Commanding Officer and staff of Oceana and the political leaders and staff of cities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. The hallmarks of these relationships are frequent, frank and forthright communication concerning our mutual priorities and concerns, which underpins all aspects of development." Getting to this point was a long time in the making, but the results have been impressive. The relationships have become so good that the cities also made a number of zoning changes beneficial to both installations. Other programs have been implemented to roll back encroachment, which have resulted in a net reduction of 7000 developable residential units, another \$63 million generated to purchase properties in the Clear Zone and Accident Potential Zone One (APZ-1), and in virtually eliminating development of the remaining agricultural lands in the ITA. Naval Facilities Engineering Command Real Estate Contracting Officer Patty Hankins says that city officials and Oceana staff meet monthly to identify willing sellers, set parcel priorities, as well as other areas of concern. Hankins notes: "They have been very helpful, bending over backward to work with Navy planners. There has been great leadership in the Navy and CPLO. We expect to complete the last easement acquisitions in 2013."

Challenges

By partnering with local officials, all three installations avoided major challenges and their projects moved smoothly. Fort Carson planners faced two relatively minor challenges with negative publicity regarding the Army's acquisition of water rights in the subdivision and unrealistic expectations of land values by property owners. Faced with a potential "David and Goliath" story, the Army and the County worked hard to provide a realistic picture of what the situation was really like. "So few people live on the properties, and folks are having a hard time figuring out how to maintain the roads. They have to haul water in, and the road network is poor. All of these factors are making the subdivision a less desirable place to live. In the future when absentee landowners will be solicited to sell their property, we are considering sending photographs of the area around the subdivision, so owners have a more realistic, better understanding of what they actually own," Thomas says.

Planners at Robins Air Force Base faced a similar issue, working to gain the trust of many private property owners through educating and communicating with them. Hayden says, "Without having the close working relationship in place with the MGRC, local governments and other community stakeholders I'm sure we would not be anywhere near resolving the encroachment issue that Robins AFB faced back in 2009." One tactic that worked well was a website with maps and frequently asked questions to inform landowners of the process in the most transparent way possible. "The website provided local citizens with a sense of empowerment as to what is taking place in their communities," notes Hayden. Due to the diligent efforts from these partnerships at the local level, the issue of encroachment on Robins was

elevated to the state level in 2012 when the governor signed new legislation providing another \$7 million towards land purchases.

The major challenge Oceana planners faced was educating city officials and the general public on the importance of stopping incompatible development in critical regions surrounding the installation. As part of the education process, Firenze notes: "The Commanding Officer adopted a highly visible, hard-line posture when addressing issues of incompatible development. As such, he briefed the city councils on the incompatibility of residential development near air stations, wrote letters of opposition to all known proposals for incompatible development, and regularly attended council meetings to voice opposition to undesirable projects." At the same time, the installation launched an aggressive community outreach program that included a device that simulated the effects of aircraft noise inside houses.

Lessons Learned

The biggest lesson learned is that installations must develop strong relationships with local officials to be truly successful in preventing incompatible development in buffer regions. Officials must be clear about the installation's needs and the consequences if those needs aren't meant. To help develop and maintain strong relations, consider:

- Scheduling regular meeting to identify willing sellers and agree to priority parcels.
- Educating local communities how the base impacts them economically.
- Engaging state a local policymakers. In particular, planners, environmental and Judge Advocate personnel must develop and maintain strong personal relationships with local communities in developing a regional planning effort.
- Reaching out to local media to generate positive support.
- Developing a Joint Land Use Study (JLUS). Hinton says, "We found in dealing with eight city and county governments, the JLUS is critical to not only our success with the REPI Program, but also in maintaining strong partnerships on most any issue that arises." It's also critical to remember that the JLUS is only as good as the efforts of the installation and community stakeholders (including citizens) in both planning and implementation.

Accomplishments

Fort Carson

- 120 lots totaling more than 1,000 acres permanently protected in the El Rancho subdivision within the Fort Carson buffer region with the expectation that more properties will be acquired over the next few years.
- Acquisition of water rights to the El Rancho subdivision to prevent further development adjacent to training and bombing ranges.

Robins Air Force Base

- Voter-approved sales tax to fund land acquisition in the buffer region that secured over \$13 million.
- 61 of 250 properties identified in the Robins Air Force Base's Accident Potential Zone and Noise Contours purchased and repurposed for compatible uses. Planners estimate that an additional 125 properties will be secured by the end of 2012.
- The 1998 AICUZ noise contours were adopted in the 2004 JLUS as Comprehensive Mission Noise Contours, which means they will remain constant and local planning and zoning commissions can use them for legal zones in deed restrictions

Naval Air Station Oceana

- Zoning changes that resulted in full adoption of the Navy AICUZ Program and a net reduction of 7,000 developable units.
- Acquisition programs designed to roll back encroachment in APZ-1 and Clear Zone.
- Virtual elimination of development in the remaining agricultural areas in the ITA by rezoning land to one unit per 15 developable acres and partnering under the REPI program.
- 2,332 acres in the ITA permanently protected.