

BASE FEARS ENCROACHMENT

Officials urge county to bar further residential development near Fairchild

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A stream of military and aviation officials lined up last week to urge Spokane County to adopt regulations that would prevent additional residential development around Fairchild Air Force Base and Spokane International Airport.

Residential development can encroach upon airfields, both in noise complaints from homeowners and with safety issues, when people are living near the area where plane crashes are most likely to occur. Proponents of Fairchild cite "encroachment" as the No. 1 reason why air force bases nationwide get shut down during periodic federal evaluations.

But the problem of rising residential development around Fairchild is partially one of the county's own making.

In May 2005, Spokane County revised a zoning ordinance to allow residential development in light industrial zones, which is the zone that surrounds much of Spokane International and Fairchild.

"Historically, we've been in really good shape because light industrial didn't allow residential," said Lee Paul, Fairchild's director of engineering. "Within the last 18 months, residential construction is allowed in the light industrial area, and that's increasing the amount of incompatibility."

Paul spoke at a Spokane County Planning Commission hearing in which several proposed amendments to the county's comprehensive plan were considered. One of them adds numerous measures to further protect the airports from encroachment. Others who spoke in favor of the measures included: Spokane International Airport Director Neal Sealock, Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce President Rich Hadley, and John Shambaugh, an aviation planner with the state Department of Transportation.

Spokane County commission Chairman Todd Mielke said the change to the light industrial zone around the airports was an honest mistake. He said the county has light industrial land in northeast Spokane County, in Hillyard and on former Kaiser Aluminum land. Consultants representing Kaiser have approached the county with redevelopment plans, Mielke said.

"We became so focused on trying to redevelop the Kaiser Mead property that I forgot how close light industrial lands came to the airport and Fairchild specifically. Not until people started making applications did I see that," Mielke said. "Within nine months, we realized we had probably overstepped where we wanted to go, by being too broad. When we caught it, we thought how do we fix it? So we decided to go ahead and impose a moratorium."

On Oct. 3, the county passed a moratorium on residential construction in the West Plains, which sparked outrage among some in the development community who already had permitted projects for new apartment complexes. Since the light industrial zone was expanded, two apartment complexes have been permitted on the West Plains - for a total of about 380 new units, said John Pederson, the county's assistant planning director.

The moratorium was proposed by Commissioner Phil Harris and supported by Commissioner Mark Richard, news reports show. Mielke was absent. The vote on the initial change to the light industrial zone was 2-0, supported by Mielke and Richard. Harris, who is up for re-election, was absent. Encroachment has been an issue in Harris' race against Democrat Bonnie Mager.

The planning commission will begin deliberations Thursday on the proposed comprehensive plan amendments, including the airport protection measures. The public comment period closes at noon today. The planning commission eventually will make a recommendation to the commissioners about whether to adopt the amendments.

Mielke said the county will hold a public meeting on Nov. 28 to discuss the future of the moratorium. He said modifications to the light industrial zone also are possible. One option being considered, he said, is having two tiers of light industrial zoning: one around the airports that would restrict residential development, and one for everywhere else.

With 5,500 employees, Fairchild is the region's largest employer, representing an annual economic impact of \$1.2 billion, according to Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce officials. The economic impact of Spokane International is similar, said Hadley, the chamber president.

"Don't allow our community to sit back on its laurels," said Ed Neunherz, a retired air force officer and ex-chairman of the Chamber's armed services committee, speaking at the Planning Commission hearing. "If encroachment is allowed to continue around Fairchild Air Force Base, the base will be closed and our region's largest employer will go away."