

COMMISSION OK'S LAND USE PLAN

Pamela E. Walck
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Chatham County commissioners approved a comprehensive plan Friday that will serve as a guideline for development until 2033.

They also declared support for Hunter Army Airfield by deeming portions of undeveloped land west of the base's runway as "off-limits" to future residential growth because it's within noise and accident zones.

The land is part of nearly 900 acres currently zoned for manufacturing - as it has been since 1962. But under the Metropolitan Planning Commission's updated Tricentennial Plan, the tract will be approved for both commercial and light industrial development.

Officials from the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce and Hunter said the measure will allow property owners to benefit from their investment as well as protect the base from future scrutiny by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

"The owners will still be able to make money off their property," said Trip Tollison, the chamber's vice president of government affairs and industry.

As a preventive measure, Tollison said the chamber will now begin the process of seeking local, state and federal funding to purchase the land abutting the base in hopes of creating a further "buffer." He said a similar measure was taken at Warner Robins Air Force base in north Georgia.

"Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield are the only joint bases on the East Coast," said Garrison Commander Lt. Col. Carl R. Coffman. "It is critical to us... As Fort Stewart goes, so goes Hunter Army Airfield. They are not two separate entities. It is one."

During the commission meeting, Tollison and District 6 Commissioner David Gellatly noted that in recent years military bases closed by BRAC were often ones where residential development began encroaching upon the base, prompting complaints about noise levels and fears of public safety caught in flight paths.

After the vote, Coffman noted that reading local history is an easy indication of how Hunter was once as many as six miles from the city, but now finds itself surrounded by Savannah.

"How do we want history to read in 2030?" Coffman asked.

During a lengthy discussion, commissioners expressed concerns about limiting the property owners' rights and the need for keeping the military base secure.

"Our nation's safety is a highest priority," said District 7 Commissioner Dean Kicklighter. "But a land owner's ability to use their land is important, too It's not a good idea to take away from their property rights."

But Tom Taggart, representing the county, said he was confident that wasn't the case.

"If you're doing anything, you are increasing the value of the use of the land," said Taggart. "In fact, they can do more."

Taggart was stepping in for County Attorney Jon Hart, whose previous firm's pension plan has a 30 percent interest in the land. Hart has recused himself from the matter.

Attorney Josh Walker, with Weiner Shearhouse Weitz Greenburg & Shawe who is representing the landowners, argued this comprehensive plan would impact the property owners' rights,

"While I certainly respect Mr. Taggart's opinion, we want to voice our concerns," Walker said, adding that eliminating the residential element would be a negative impact on the land.

Walker's objection was quickly dismissed when commissioners noted the land isn't currently zoned for residential development.

Gellatly, meanwhile, urged fellow commissioners to consider the bigger picture.

"Hunter didn't just move in there last week. They (property owners) knew it was over a flight area and it's not like they bought the land and now they are surprised there is an air base there," he said. "That is just not the case."

"This is a very critical vote we are being asked to make. This land should not be developed period. If it is, it should be done in a way that has minimal effect on (Hunter)."