

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE GROWTH HINGES ON 46TH TEST WING

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Northwest Florida Daily News
Fort Walton Beach, FL
March 22, 2007

Base Preparing for More Than \$645 Million in Construction for New Units

Leaders of the Air Armament Center and 96th Air Base Wing continue planning for thousands of troops heading to Eglin Air Force Base, although they're still waiting to hear if some of that impact would be offset by moving the 46th Test Wing.

Bob Arnold, chairman of Eglin's Mission Enhancement Committee, said the test wing has been contacted by RAND Corp. researchers studying the test wing. The study, which is to be submitted to Congress by March 31, should include a breakdown of costs and benefits of moving the test wing to **Edwards Air Force Base**, as well as closing facilities such as McKinley Climatic Laboratory, as has been proposed.

"We have been asked extensively for information ... and we have provided all the information," said Arnold.

The RAND study has included at least one visit to Eglin, emailings and telephone calls.

A preliminary report has been finished, according to a local official.

The test wing employs or contracts more than 3,000 people. Its economic impact has been estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

Arnold talked about the test wing's future Wednesday after he made a presentation to the Rotary Club of Fort Walton Beach that included ongoing Base Realignment and Closure preparations.

Getting ready for some 4,400 troops - the number excludes families and others coming along - means more than \$645 million in construction at Eglin, said Arnold.

Construction to accommodate the Army 7th Special Forces Group and flight and maintenance training facilities for the F-35 is scheduled to start in the summer or early fall of 2008.

The Specials Forces unit has said it prefers a site near Duke Field.

Facilities for the F-35 could go where the 33rd Fighter Wing is now located.

The F-35 is commonly known as the Joint Strike Fighter.

Arnold said he expected the last fighter wing F-15 to leave the base in about three years and F-35s to begin arriving at about the same time.

The fighter wing will become a training wing.

"By the time the (transition) is done, we'll have a whole lot more aircraft here than (when) we started," he added.

More than 100 F-35s are expected at Eglin. The fighter wing operates 54 F-15s.