

NAVY REAFFIRMS COMMITMENT TO OCEANA NAVAL AIR STATION

By DALE EISMAN, The Virginian-Pilot ©

March 2, 2007

Last updated: 12:23 AM

WASHINGTON - Navy leaders on Thursday signaled their satisfaction with Virginia Beach's plans to restrict development around Oceana Naval Air Station, telling lawmakers they expect to retain the base so long as nearby commercial and residential growth are kept in check.

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chief of naval operations, and Navy Secretary Donald Winter - prodded by U.S. Rep. Thelma Drake, R-2nd District - praised local moves to roll back some existing development and give the service a larger voice in decisions about future projects around the base.

The service is committed to staying at Oceana "as long as these things continue to go well," Mullen said.

The Navy leader had earlier voiced his preference for keeping Oceana open; a new base could cost up to \$2 billion.

Drake said the Navy statements, made during a House Armed Services Committee hearing, offer assurance that a two-year struggle to preserve Oceana is over "as long as Virginia Beach does what Virginia Beach says they're going to do.... The ball is in our court."

The sprawling base just west of the Oceanfront is an economic powerhouse for Virginia Beach, employing 12,000 people with an annual payroll of more than \$700 million. More than 200 Navy fighter planes are based at Oceana, making it the service's East Coast "master jet base."

But subdivisions, strip malls and other development, much of it approved by the city over the Navy's objections, have sprung up in high-risk "accident potential zones" near the end of Oceana's runways.

Eighteen months ago, a federal base-closing commission concluded that development around the base was hazardous to pilots and residents, and was hampering the Navy's ability to properly train pilots.

The commission urged that hundreds of F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets be relocated from Oceana to Cecil Field, a former Navy base just outside Jacksonville, Fla.

While local opposition in Jacksonville derailed that plan, Virginia Beach and state officials embraced most of a long list of commission recommendations aimed at controlling growth around Oceana.

"This is a very serious long-term commitment by the city" and the state, Drake said Thursday.

· Reach Dale Eisman at (703) 913-9872 or dale.eisman@pilotonline.com.