

BACK FENCE

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STAY OR GO?

BRAC Considers Oceana Despite Its Benefits to City, Navy

Nearly two weeks ago, the federal Base Realignment and Closing (BRAC) Commission did something that shocked a number of communities — it added eight additional installations to the Defense Department's list of bases recommended for closure or realignment. Historically speaking, BRAC



MAX
HAMEL

Commissions have always exercised their own independent judgment with respect to the Pentagon's initial recommendations. That includes not only removing bases initially recommended for closure from the list but also *adding* bases that were never on it in the first place. So while the Pentagon may submit a list of bases recommended for closure and realignment to the Commission, it also submits reams of data and analysis on every single military installation in the country. Commissioners and staff examine that material, and, as has been the case in past rounds, often have their own ideas on how a BRAC round should proceed.

The prospect of Naval Air Station (NAS) Oceana appearing on a BRAC list was not entirely out of the blue. For at least 30 years the Navy and Virginia Beach have struggled to coexist. In an effort to accommodate tremendous growth, the city actively rezoned agricultural and commercial land, converting it into residential developments. The Navy opposed the majority of those projects, albeit in a fairly passive-aggressive way. Nevertheless, ever-encroaching neighborhoods continue to spring up around the base, even as the community as a whole truly embraces the Navy and the contributions it has made both economically and to the community's social fabric. At its heart, the Navy is a big family, and Virginia Beach is a family-oriented community. It was and continues to be a good fit in that respect, despite the grumblings of a vocal minority.



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Members of the BRAC Commission are scheduled to visit Oceana to decide if closure is appropriate.

As early as 1987, however, the Navy began warning that encroachment outside the fence at Oceana threatened the base's future. The flight paths for Oceana's three major runways are directly over thousands of neighborhoods, malls, and businesses that certainly weren't there when the base was completed in 1940.

FAST FORWARD another 20 years and one of the fastest-growing cities on the Eastern seaboard playing host to one of the Navy's most active airfields has caught the attention of the BRAC Commission and has put Oceana front and center as a prospect for closure.

Conventional wisdom suggests Oceana should remain open, as the Navy argues it should. Yet past BRAC rounds have defied conventional wisdom.

During the 1993 BRAC round, for instance, the Pentagon recommended closing McGuire Air Force

Base in New Jersey. Like Oceana, there were serious encroachment issues, but other problems also existed: Aging infrastructure, not to mention flight patterns adjacent to New York City's busiest airports, counted against the facility.

The word was that McGuire would close. Instead, by the time the BRAC Commission had completed its review, McGuire AFB was off the list and actually saw mission growth. In its place, the Commission recommended shuttering Plattsburg Air Force Base in upstate New York. More than anything, there is a lesson there for communities to stay on their toes. It also means that for Virginia Beach and Oceana, there are a few more acts to play out.

Tomorrow, four members of the BRAC Commission, including chairman Anthony Principi, are scheduled to visit Oceana, take a tour of the base, meet with the base commander, and likely ask some pretty direct questions related to encroachment, fu-

ture growth, Oceana's integration with the community and its relationship with Virginia Beach, and the base's ability to handle future missions. Ultimately what the commissioners will try to decide is whether it is appropriate to even consider Oceana for closure in the current BRAC round. Much of that will depend on whether — considering the challenges that Oceana presents, based on the Navy's current and future military, training, and readiness needs — there is a better *existing* alternative.

BY LAW, THE transfer of land and personnel must be completed within six years of the Commission's final recommendations. Although the Navy has indicated that while it may want to replace Oceana at some point in the future with a 21st-Century master jet base, it has no specific plan to do so. Site acquisition and construction would take more than 10 years by the Navy's own estimates, well outside the requirements of the BRAC statute.

All of this will play out during the Commission's final deliberations the week of August 22, when commissioners will prepare their final recommendations to be forwarded to the President by September 8. Seven of the nine commissioners must agree to each recommendation.

Oceana has a lot going for it that weighs in its favor — a strategic location in close proximity to the carrier fleet in Norfolk; extensive facilities for the 10,000-plus servicemen stationed there; the integration of Virginia Beach's SEALs and other special forces; and the tremendous economic value to one of Virginia's most populous regions. *But:* Oceana also has a serious encroachment problem.

In a little more than a month we'll know which argument prevails.

■ Max Hamel, a Virginia Beach native and former policy adviser to Governor Jim Gilmore, is vice president of Dutko Worldwide, a public policy management firm providing consulting services to public and private entities in the 2005 BRAC round.

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