

Alaska politicians pledge to oppose military base cutbacks

By DAN JOLING

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Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's announcement that the Pentagon will seek new rounds of military base closures drew a swift response from Alaskans who watched a similar process nearly gut Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks in 2005.

Alaska's congressional delegation and Gov. Sean Parnell issued a joint statement saying they will stand together to resist attempts to close or shrink Alaska bases.

"Alaska's military bases provide essential defense for the nation," Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, said in the statement. "They are even more important with the administration's new focus on security concerns in the Pacific and with international attention on the changing Arctic."

Panetta at a news conference Thursday said the Army will be cut by 80,000 soldiers, from 570,000 to 490,000, by 2017. He also called for additional rounds of base closures and realignment.

Under the closure process, defense officials submit a list of bases to a Base Closure and Realignment Commission. The commission analyzes the recommendations and sends its own list to the president, who can ask for more evaluation. The president eventually sends the report to Congress, which can pass a joint resolution to reject the full report. If Congress does not pass the joint resolution, the report becomes law.

The military in May 2005 recommended closure of 33 major bases and substantial reductions at 29 more. That included the recommended partial shutdown of Eielson Air Force Base, the sprawling air field in the Fairbanks North Star Borough, which housed a squadron of F-16 fighters and A-10 Thunderbolts. The Defense Department recommended Eielson for "warm" status, a part-time base where squadrons from other bases could use for training.

Begich, Parnell, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Rep. Don Young on Thursday stressed Alaska's strategic importance to the nation, but an underlying issue is the role the military plays in the state's economy — 32 installations, more than 23,000 active duty service members, more than 37,000 active family members. It adds up to more than 13 percent of the state economy.

The Pentagon in 2005 projected Eielson's loss at 2,821 military jobs and 319 civilian jobs — just under 4 percent of the Fairbanks North Star Borough population without counting 3,300 dependents. The military estimated a savings of \$2.7 billion over 20 years at Eielson.

When the BRAC commission visited Fairbanks a month after the announcement, the community responded with fervor. More than 3,000 residents filled a civic center for the hearing. The late U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, retired Air Force General Pat Gamble and retired Army Maj. Gen. Mark Hamilton, the current and former presidents of the University of Alaska, made impassioned statements in opposition to Eielson changes, noting its strategic importance on polar air routes and its location at the mid-way point of the trans-Alaska pipeline.

The testimony and show of community support worked. The base lost its A-10 warthogs but kept the F-16s and most permanent employees.

Young called Panetta's announcement unwelcome and not surprising, but said it's only the beginning of a long process that will include opportunities to support Alaska's military installations.

Begich said he supports saving money in nearly every area of the federal budget, including the cutting of overseas military bases, which are more expensive to operate and maintain.

"But requesting congressional approval to begin another domestic BRAC process in 2013, shortly after spending billions to complete the most recent BRAC round just doesn't make sense," he said.

Murkowski, who was serving her first term in 2005, said the military's increased commitment to Asia and the Pacific underscores the importance of Alaska bases.

"If the Defense Department is true to its strategy, contribution to the military mission should grow in the coming years," she said in the statement.

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