

MAKING PEACE

Lawmakers are looking for ways to resolve land-use conflicts between civilian communities and military bases.

BY MELISSA SAVAGE

The juniper and oak trees in central Texas have long been home to a little yellow bird known as the golden checked warbler. As residential development swept through central Texas, however, the birds had to move. Today, the golden-cheeked warbler is an endangered species and, with nowhere else to go, has moved onto Camp Bullis, a military installation just outside of San Antonio.

Home to about 130 military personnel, Camp Bullis sits on 12,000 acres and serves as a medical training facility for all military branches. The specialized training on the base has helped improve the survival rate for wounded soldiers. Today, 90 percent of those wounded in battle survive.

When the golden-cheeked warbler decided to take up residence on the base, the commanding officers had to adjust how they conducted their training exercises, since less land was available.

Over the years, military bases across the country have had to take on the unlikely role of environmental steward, maintaining habitats for endangered species, migrating birds and certain bugs. But environmental concerns are just part of the equation that pits the needs of the military against those of growing communities. And this new environmental job sometimes runs counter to the overall mission of each base: training soldiers for combat.

The problems faced at Camp Bullis are playing out at other military installations across the country. In some 20 states, legislators already have enacted laws to address the conflicts between military installations and encroaching civilian residential populations.

Senator Leticia Van de Putte, who represents the district that is home to Fort Sam Houston—another military base near San

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Antonio—has seen the consequences of residential development near military bases. It’s in her backyard. But she also knows the encroachment issue isn’t confined to San Antonio. It’s a problem for bases across the country, from the Marine’s Camp Pendleton in southern California to the Army’s Fort A.P. Hill in northern Virginia.

“For legislators with installations in their district, it’s critical that they stay aware of what’s happening on the bases, in the community and how state legislation can play a role in helping strike a balance between the community’s needs and ensuring the military base can meet its mission,” Van de Putte says. “The good news is that, while encroachment is pretty common, states, military bases and local communities are working together.

Partnerships among states, cities and military bases are becoming the premier strategy to accomplish common goals.”

ROLE OF MILITARY BASES

During the last several years of base closures, communities have fought to keep their bases open for many reasons, but mostly because of the huge economic benefits military bases can bring to local communities and states. They generate civilian jobs and pour millions of dollars each year into the local economy. The loss of a base can be devastating to a community.

In San Antonio, the U.S. Department of Defense is one of the largest employers, providing jobs to more than 68,000 people, a third of them civilians. According to the Department of Defense, the direct and indirect economic effect of the military in San Antonio was more than \$13.3 billion in 2006.

As development inches closer to installations, limiting the ability to conduct effective military training, the Department of Defense might be left with no other choice than to close bases.

Maryland Delegate Sally Jameson knows just what military bases can mean to a community.

“For those of us with bases in our districts, we relish the jobs and dollars that spin into our local economies,” she says. “In some areas, the loss of a base could mean the destruction of the local community.

“The next step is to realize the significant problems bases can face when dealing with encroachment. It can stand in the way of our



SENATOR
LETICIA VAN DE PUTTE
TEXAS



DELEGATE
SALLY JAMESON
MARYLAND

Author credit: Melissa Savage tracks military base issues for NCSL.

bases meeting their No. 1 priority—troop readiness. Staying focused on land issues and keeping the lines of communication open with base leadership is so important.”

Years ago, when the Department of Defense located many of its current military installations, it looked for land in the middle of nowhere. Having space to train away from cities limits the impact of light pollution on flight paths and keeps citizens on the other side of the fence safe during live fire training exercises. Over the last few decades, as cities have grown closer to the installations, the impact on the military sometimes has been severe.

While base commanding officers will tell you they want to be good neighbors, their primary mission is to train soldiers to fight.

WORKING TOGETHER

Keeping information flowing to the community regarding training and missions can help build and strengthen the relationships between local residents and the military, says John Conger, deputy undersecretary for Installations and the Environment with the Department of Defense.

“It’s important to raise awareness that what’s happening in the community can affect what happens on the base and what’s happening on the base can affect the community. Working together in partnership is a win-win.”

Establishing a solid foundation for a successful long-term relationship between the military installation and the community is paramount, given the short-term nature of military post appointments and the election cycle facing many government officials.

“Base commanders and elected officials tend to have short-term perspectives given the very nature of their positions,” says Kansas Representative Tom Sloan. “Commanders generally are stationed at the base for a relatively short period of time—usually no longer than two to three years. And elected officials are subject to term limits in some

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states, and at the very least, elections every few years.

“Because of this tendency to focus on the short term, it’s important that legislators and base commanders work together to put a framework in place that ensures the long-term success of the relationship so future base commanders and elected officials can hit the ground running.”

Sloan also points out that military bases with strong community partnerships and a plan to minimize civilian impact on training are less likely to be closed.

To help foster these relationships, the Department of Defense has a program known as the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative. This initiative leverages federal money with local community funding to acquire land that will serve as a buffer between the installation—and its training missions—and the homes, businesses, schools and other community areas surrounding the base. The added benefit is that, in many cases, the community ends up with a significant portion of land that will remain undeveloped forever. This protected land also provides a home for wildlife, and maybe even endangered species like the golden-cheeked warbler.

LEGISLATIVE ROLE

Even though military installations are federally owned and operated, state legislatures can minimize conflict between bases and communities. Several states have passed legislation to establish military and community partnerships and limit encroachment on the installations as much as possible.

Twenty states have enacted land use-related

laws that either require local governments to ensure compatible development with land adjacent to military bases; formalize notification of local zoning changes to the military; and use state resources to purchase development rights, conservation easements or transfer rights to restore and preserve open space.

Last year, state legislators debated around 40 bills dealing with these issues. The Texas Legislature passed a bill allowing counties to regulate outdoor lighting within five miles of an installation, base or camp that will allow military pilots to train in conditions that mimic what they will face in combat. Texas also passed legislation moving the Texas Military Preparedness Commission into the governor’s office and removed the commission’s sunset date. The commission works directly with military installations to expand existing missions and other defense communities affected by base closings.

Kansas’ Sloan has teed up some legislation for the 2010 session that will require military commanders and local government officials to consult on any development that affects the other.

“The goal here is to include the other side early in the conversation so there will be fewer surprises and less antagonism,” Sloan says. “This will ultimately lead to stronger partnerships between the military and the community, ensure successful military training exercises, and help the community meet the off-base needs of their military neighbors.”

CHECK OUT a Q and A with a Department of Defense official on success stories in civilian-military land-use issues at www.ncsl.org/magazine.



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