

## Cities push for Luke as F-35 training site

Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services

October 14, 2009 - 2:21PM , updated: October 14, 2009 - 4:43PM

Leaders of 12 Valley cities and Maricopa County launched a campaign Wednesday to make Luke Air Force Base a training site for the yet-to-be-built F-35 joint strike fighter.

The move is designed to ensure there is a future for the 68-year-old base.

That is more than an idle concern: The military is already looking at replacing its aging fleet of F-16s — along with some other fighters — with the new F-35. And the only pilot and maintenance training going on now at Luke is for the F-16.

Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs said the lobbying and public relations effort, being dubbed “Luke Forward,” is designed to convince those who will be making the final decision that the F-35 “is welcome here.”

“We have learned more and more how important community support is to them and how very important it is to dispel misperceptions that some may have that growth in our areas has not been well managed and therefore is not conducive to what Luke Air Force Base does, and that’s to train our fighter jet pilots,” she said. “Everybody realizes the importance of what Luke does to our nation’s success and realizes the importance of Luke Air Force Base as part of the military industry of the state of Arizona.”

But the campaign lacks unanimous backing: The city of El Mirage won’t sign on in support, at least not yet.

City spokeswoman Stacy Pearson, who was at Wednesday’s event, said her city’s final position on promoting Luke as an F-35 training base is going to depend on the noise.

“If it’s a negligible increase, it’s not going to make a single bit of difference,” Pearson said. She said residents who already are there support the base.

“But if it’s a lot louder, if it’s windows, if it’s doors, if it’s noise mitigation, there are issues that are going to need to be addressed to preserve quality of life in their homes,” she said.

Who El Mirage expects to pay for that, she said, is undecided.

Earlier this week, El Mirage Mayor Michele Kern wrote to Defense Secretary Robert Gates asking for an environmental assessment of the impact of the new aircraft “before a decision is made to select Luke Air Force Base as a candidate for an F-35 training mission.”

Kern specifically wants Gates to bring two of the prototype aircraft to Luke for a week and operate them in “full training mission” to allow area residents to “evaluate for themselves the full environmental impact” the aircraft will have.

A study performed earlier this year at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida for the city of Valpariso found “touch-and-go” noise levels for the F-16 — the jet now housed at Luke — ranging from 88.2 to 91.4 decibels. “Touch and go” refers to a training exercise where an aircraft lands but, instead of stopping, takes off again.

A similar operation by a prototype F-35 registered at 102.1 decibels.

That difference is greater than it appears: Every 10 decibel difference translates into a tenfold increase in sound intensity. And those readings were taken at the approach end of the runway; takeoffs under full military power are likely to be noisier.

Scruggs said she won’t add her voice to the request of Kern for a noise test using a prototype F-35 before the Department of Defense makes its decision. She said it is up to the military, which will conduct its own environmental impact study, to determine if such a test is necessary.

“I believe what is best is for individual communities to stay out of the assessment process,” Scruggs said. She said El Mirage can present its concerns to the military at that time.

Gov. Jan Brewer, who is adding her voice to the campaign, said she is hoping El Mirage leaders “can be given the kind of information that they need in order to come on board” with the effort to land F-35.

But the governor brushed aside the concerns about noise.

“The F-16s fly over my house,” she said. “And it’s the sound of freedom.”

Brewer’s house, however, is at least 10 miles from the end of the Luke runways.

The governor said the F-35 “possibly is a little bit noisier.”

“But I support the mission, I support the F-35 coming to Luke Air Force Base,” she said.

In a written statement, Sen. John McCain said while he is supporting the effort, he is committed to ensuring that the Air Force conducts a “thorough and comprehensive” environmental impact study, “including the careful consideration of legitimate concerns expressed by local communities.” McCain said he is convinced the military “will take prudent steps to mitigate any negative impact resulting from the stationing of the F-35.”

Scruggs made her anger with El Mirage more than clear.

“El Mirage has chosen to try to depict itself as the only city bearing the brunt of the flights from Luke Air Force Base,” she said. But Scruggs said the planes generally take off — the noisiest part of operations — to the south.

“And Goodyear is not jumping up and down and complaining,” she said.

She also said city leaders made “decades of poor choices” in land use planning. Scruggs said the city wasn’t incorporated until 1951 — a decade after the air base was there — and should have put compatible commercial and industrial uses in the noisiest areas rather than leaving that space for residential development.

The first hurdle for this new committee comes early next year when the Pentagon is expected to release its “short list” of possible sites for F-35 training. That, however, could include dozens of bases, if not more, with the real whittling down coming in the following 18 months.

Brewer said her decision to back the Luke proposal was not a slap at Tucsonans who have launched their own campaign to have Davis-Monthan Air Force base become the home for the military’s newest jet. Instead, she said the bid for Luke makes more sense.

“I’m not saying ‘too bad’ to Tucson,” the governor responded to questions about her decision. “I’m saying that I believe at this particular time, with the work that has been done, the statutes that have been put into law to protect Luke Air Force Base, that we have a much stronger chance of getting the F-35 here.”

Scruggs sidestepped the question of whether it is fair for Brewer to support that bid over the push for D-M.

“What you should look at is Luke is the training base where all the training for the fighter jets for the airport is done,” Scruggs said.

“Just like any other business in this state, she is supporting a business continuing its business,” the mayor explained of Brewer’s position. By contrast, Scruggs continued, D-M has other missions.

“And I am sure she totally supports them retaining their mission so they can continue in Tucson,” the mayor said, calling the situations “apples and oranges.”