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D-M could be base for loud new fighter jet

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Tucsonans should learn next month whether their city is a potential home base for the nation's newest warbird: the high-tech, high-volume F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Air Force officials expect to release a list of preliminary basing choices in October and are in the process of weighing the pros and cons of more than 200 sites in the run-up to those decisions. Once the list is made public, environmental impact studies will be carried out, allowing for community input before final basing decisions are announced early in 2011. The service is looking to find homes for up to 300 of the new jets by 2017.

"The Air Force is committed to an open and transparent process to address F-35 basing issues," Kathleen Ferguson, deputy assistant Air Force secretary for installations, said in a news release.

The D-M 50, a local booster group that supports Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, is on record endorsing D-M as a future home for the F-35, which is expected to be much louder than the A-10 attack jets currently flown from the base.

Depending on altitude, the new jet could be up to a dozen times louder, according to an Arizona Daily Star analysis of Air Force environmental data.

The F-35 will eventually replace the aging A-10, which is due to remain in service until 2028 under current life-span projections. That date could change, though, and the service already has plans to retire some older A-10s next year, including several at D-M.

Eugene Santarelli, the military consultant who helped put together the D-M 50's pitch for the F-35 back in 2004, now says that if he had it to do over again, he'd focus more on promoting D-M as a location for quieter missions such as unmanned aircraft training or light attack aircraft.

Santarelli, a retired lieutenant general and former D-M wing commander, said the Tucson air base has many features that make it attractive to the Air Force, such as fine flying weather and proximity to the massive Barry M. Goldwater training range west of the city.

But "noise will be an issue," as the Air Force seeks home bases for the F-35, said Santarelli, noting that the service already is embroiled in a lawsuit over the jet's initial home base site in Florida.

The city of Valparaiso, a municipality of 6,200 or so that borders Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, is claiming in court that the Air Force's initial basing plan would make more than half that city too noisy to inhabit. Valparaiso Mayor John B. Arnold said in a phone interview that the service's own data show many residents would experience noise levels at or above 75 decibels as a day-night average, making their homes unsuitable for residential use. Arnold said the city and the service are trying to reach a settlement that would make the aircraft's presence less intrusive.

The service has reduced the number of F-35s to be stationed at Eglin to 59 from its original proposal for more than 100, Air Force spokesman Gary Strasburg said.

The Air Force also is carrying out a second environmental impact study and won't decide whether to bring the extra planes to Eglin until those efforts are complete, he said. In selecting other sites, the service will first consider factors such as weather, proximity to training ranges, availability of support facilities, environmental concerns and cost. After that, it will look at secondary factors such as maintenance, logistics support and aircraft retirement and delivery schedules.

In Tucson, some fear the new jet's decibel level would undo all of D-M's past efforts to reduce aircraft noise over the city. "I really can't believe they would base that aircraft in Tucson. I'd be surprised if they put them in big metropolitan areas," said Gail Cordy, vice chair of the Military Community Relations Committee, formed two years ago to enhance ties between D-M and city residents.

Whatever the outcome of the search for F-35 sites, D-M will keep striving to be a good neighbor, base officials said. "Regardless of the decision made," said base spokeswoman Capt. Stacie Shafran, "Davis-Monthan remains committed to engaging and keeping the community informed."

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