

El Mirage sets sights on Luke

The future of El Mirage is buried in its past, and it wants that past linked to the future of Luke Air Force Base.

Not everyone likes where this story could go.

Valley leaders chafe at the audacity of El Mirage officials in raising concerns about the potential for increased noise that a new F-35 training mission might bring to communities surrounding Luke.

Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs, Gov. Jan Brewer and leaders of other Arizona cities this week launched a statewide effort to demonstrate unwavering support for Luke.

El Mirage is not part of the Luke Forward campaign. It stands alone in the West Valley in arguing that efforts to protect the base from encroachment have hurt the city's economic-development potential.

It has launched its own campaign to right what it believes are historical wrongs and to deliver a better community for its residents. The campaign includes a Quality of Life and Sustainability Forum on Wednesday.

The El Mirage story, told in part by a package of newspaper articles compiled by the city, begins three decades ago with El Mirage's efforts to establish a solid economic footing. Luke officials, state leaders and neighboring cities shot down those efforts, El Mirage says.

For example, when El Mirage annexed nearly 2,000 acres of land in 1977, then-Attorney General Bruce Babbitt sued to try to undo the annexation. City leaders envisioned the land for a planned community with apartments, shopping centers and industrial development.

The annexation was not overturned, but it prompted Glendale, Goodyear and base officials to work together to annex a strip of land around the base to keep other cities from expanding their boundaries. Glendale strip-annexed 40 square miles of land and Goodyear locked in about 11 square miles.

Working to make the best use of the land they had, El Mirage officials crafted major redevelopment plans. In the summer of 1983, the president of a development company announced plans for a convention center, resort and 18-hole golf course for the west bank of the Agua Fria River.

When El Mirage applied for a federal loan to start development of the \$20 million resort and about \$50 million worth of redevelopment projects, they learned that Luke officials had filed an objection with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Col. Jim Reinhardt, a Luke spokesman at the time, told The Republic in December 1983 that they were concerned about El Mirage's plans. "This is about five miles off the north end of our runway, this \$20 million proposed complex," Reinhardt said, adding that the proposed resort could attract additional developments that could further aggravate encroachment on Luke.

More development is exactly what El Mirage was counting on to transform itself from a predominately migrant community into a self-sustaining community with attractions and amenities that would build a stronger quality of life for residents. The resort was expected to create 600 jobs, a new tax base and economic revitalization.

It never happened. Neither would plans to develop a spring-training stadium nor a medical center nor auto mall.

Expect at the forum Wednesday to hear about this failed project and other instances where El Mirage believes Luke and others stopped the city from developing in an economically healthy way.

The story of El Mirage as told by El Mirage will likely further irritate Arizona leaders who are unhappy about the commotion the city is making, particularly now as military officials start the process of selecting a training base for the new F-35 fighter jet. Luke is a strong contender for the mission, which would secure its future for decades.

Many of the business and civic leaders who are behind the new Luke Forward campaign argue El Mirage is entirely responsible for its economic-development plight. Several examples of failed leadership and planning in El Mirage support those views.

The past and the future appear to be colliding. El Mirage has a story to tell, but so does the rest of the state, through Luke Forward, in explaining why the base is so important for our economy and our future.

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