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State no longer can take air base for granted

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Luke Air Force Base in Glendale is a major part of the Valley landscape, a key component in Arizona's economy and an integral part of the nation's defense. This goes without saying - and apparently that's the problem.

It has gone without saying for too long. Arizona no longer can afford to take Luke for granted.

On Wednesday, business and civic leaders launched a campaign - Luke Forward - to raise statewide awareness about the 68-year-old base and generate support for its current and future missions

The campaign begins before an expected announcement from the Defense Department that Luke is on a list of bases the military considers potential homes for the new F-35 fighter jet. A final decision from Washington is expected in 2011.

It's logical to assume Luke's long history of fighter pilot training excellence, its location in a place with weather ideal for flying and its amenities, most notably the Barry M. Goldwater Range, will put it on the short list for the F-35 mission.

Luke Forward recognizes the political and strategic risks of relying only on assumptions. So it is creating an information and public-relations campaign that leaves nothing to chance.

The campaign developed by municipal leaders and Fighter Country Partnership, a group that supports Luke, also counters, in part, some noise coming out of El Mirage that could be considered threats to the base.

El Mirage has angered many Valley leaders with its calls for compensation for harm caused by development restrictions around Luke and its suggestions that the F-35 will be louder than the F-16s currently flying out of the base.

Supporters of Luke note that this concern will be thoroughly aired during the environmental-impact statement part of the F-35 selection process.

Luke has a profound impact on Arizona and places far beyond. More than 56,000 pilots from around the world have graduated from the base.

Luke serves a population of about 85,000 people, active duty personnel, retirees and civilians - people who seed local communities with their talents and dollars. It has an economic impact of \$2.17 billion annually.

Luke Forward directs Arizonans to its Web site (www.lukeforward.com) and asks them to register support for the base. For many, that means stating the obvious, but that's a message more important than ever to the entire state.