

McCain affirms support of Luke Air Force Base's mission

by **Cecilia Chan and Rebekah Sanders** - Aug. 31, 2009 09:01 AM
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Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., this week reiterated his support for Luke Air Force Base in light of one West Valley city's perceived efforts to derail the military installation.

"We need to do everything we can to protect Luke Air Force Base," McCain told *The Republic* at one of his town-hall meetings on health-care reform. "We're fighting two wars. I hope El Mirage and the City Council will take that into consideration."

El Mirage has made an all-out push since March to bring attention to its economic struggle with zoning restrictions near Luke. The restrictions are to protect the Glendale base from residential encroachment. El Mirage's laundry list of requests included \$400 million in federal compensation, infuriating the city's neighbors.

Several West Valley mayors said El Mirage's demands threaten Luke's hopes of landing the F-35 jet for fighter-pilot training.

El Mirage spokeswoman Stacy Pearson said the city is simply looking out for the best interest of its residents.

El Mirage contends it is in an economic chokehold, unable to grow due to restrictions on height and density development imposed on more than two-thirds of its land to prevent encroachment on the base.

Leaders of neighboring communities have met with El Mirage leaders to find out how they can help the city while still protecting the base, which pumps \$2 billion annually into Arizona's economy.

Luke supporters said it needs to secure the Joint Strike Fighter to ensure the base stays off the closure list. Luke is the world's largest F-16 training base but those planes are gradually being phased out.

The Air Force is expected to determine the candidate list for F-35s by October.