

El Mirage residents voice support for Luke Air Force Base

by Cecilia Chan - Sept. 5, 2009

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About 100 people attended a grassroots community meeting in El Mirage this week - mostly to show they don't agree with the direction that the city's leaders are taking with Luke Air Force Base.

"For the last 25 years I've lived near a base," said resident Kathy Franz on Wednesday at Pueblo El Mirage. "I feel safe. I moved here for a reason. I speak for a lot of my neighbors, we want you here."

She also asked "what can we do to calm our mayor down?" which drew claps from the audience.

El Mirage has angered its neighbors since March after city officials traveled to Washington, D.C. to seek relief from zoning restrictions imposed to protect the Glendale base from encroachment. City leaders asked for \$400 million in federal compensation and continue to push their case for economic sustainability. Others see it as a threat to the base's need to secure the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter as the F-16s are phased out.

Rusty Mitchell, director of Luke AFB Community Initiatives Team, said the base is at the mercy of elected officials and their decision-making.

"I'm not going to answer your question other than to say all of the support matters, whether it's an individual citizen or an elected mayor," Mitchell said.

One man in the audience piped up that residents can vote out Mayor Fred Waterman if he runs for re-election next August. Waterman lives in Pueblo El Mirage but did not attend the meeting. However, his wife, Carol, and Vice Mayor Michele Kern attended but neither spoke.

"Out where I live F-16s fly over my pool and my son and I love them, absolutely love them," said Dave Hodges of El Mirage.

That said, Hodges said he received a noise study on the F-35 at Eglin Air Force Base in Valparaiso, Fla., which he said shows possible hearing damage from the jets. The April study came from a recording engineer in April.

"Please tell me, it's not true," Hodges said. "I am fine with the F-16. If the F-35 is only a little noisier then we need to work together and save Luke."

Mitchell said it was premature to talk about the F-35's impacts at Luke because the Air Force has not chosen a secondary training base.

Anecdotally, Mitchell said he was at Eglin when manufacturer Lockheed Martin brought an F-35 test plane to the base.

"That F-35 to me didn't sound any different," he said. "It sounded like any other fighter aircraft."

Dan Reilly, a retired Air Force veteran, said if the base goes away, many retirees would lose base services, such as medical care and retail shopping at the base exchange, where most state and local taxes are not imposed.

After the meeting, Frantz said if the base closes the city will be left with "a lot of empty houses."

"If the mayor keeps pushing them and we lose the people who work on the base . . . El Mirage will disappear," Frantz said. "I am sorry I voted him in. I am so sorry."