

McCain cautions F-35 supporters about encroachment

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By Carolyn Dryer

Certainty and resolve stood out at the annual meeting of Fighter Country Partnership Saturday night; however, a word of caution came from U.S. Sen. John McCain.

The senior senator from Arizona removed any arrogant attitude about Luke as the bed-down base for the F-35. He said encroachment is at the top of the list when it comes to evaluating for final placement of the military's newest jet fighter. Encroachment will play a major role as part of the environmental impact study, which is set to commence next month.

"We've got work to do with county supervisors and El Mirage," McCain said.

He said those two entities must be satisfied, yet the most vital training in the United States must be preserved. He said the Navy, Marines and Air Force are trying to find a place on the East Coast to train.

"There's no place else in the continental United States where they can do that training," he said.

Although employment and impact on the Arizona economy are important factors for locating the F-35 mission at Luke Air Force Base, McCain said the most important need is "to defend this nation against enemies, foreign and domestic."

He said the cost of the F-35 is going up, but the environmental impact study and scoping process go on. He said the military will be flying F-16s for a long time, but the F-35 is the force of the future for the Navy, Marines and Air Force.

"Its capabilities are literally unbelievable," McCain said. "The F-16 is a fantastic aircraft; the F-35 is marvelous."

McCain said the F-35 would be noisier than the F-16, but did not say how much noisier. He said the public scoping and evaluation process would be the same in every part of the country that is being considered as a bed-down training base for the F-35.

"No procedure or process will be avoided," McCain said.

He said he felt confident about Luke's chances for being named a training base for the F-35 because officials have restrained encroachment.

McCain was presented with the Wing Coin and Chairman's Award by Brig. Gen. Kurt Neubauer, 56th Fighter Wing Commander, and Charley Freericks, Chairman of Fighter Country Partnership's board of directors. The award was given in recognition of McCain being a champion of Luke during his years of public service.

McCain spoke to the importance of community support organizations like Fighter Country Partnership that help keep Arizona's military installations open and active.

Neubauer thanked McCain for speaking at the gathering of more than 250 Fighter Country Partnership members and guests at the annual meeting. He noted the 27,000 sorties, 35,000 hours of flight, the training of 350 new pilots and 400 crew chiefs that took place at Luke in 2009. He told the crowd that Luke trains 95 percent of all the fighter pilots for the Air Force, and has deployed 600 down range to 17 different countries.

"It's a busy place in large part because Luke Air Force Base is a national treasure," Neubauer said.

He said the reasons for its stature is because of the infrastructure, air space, weather and community partnerships, friendships, kinships and brotherhood. Neubauer praised Fighter Country Partnership for the support it gives to airmen and their families, which he called "priceless."

"It's like nothing I've ever seen in my 28-1/2 years of service," Neubauer said. "You speak on our behalf."

He thanked Fighter Country Partnership for its ability also to set the record straight, educate the public and advocate.

"I couldn't be more proud than I am to live and serve all of you," he said.

Freericks briefed the audience about the Luke Forward campaign, which officially kicked off Oct. 14 at the state capitol. Freericks said since the campaign began, almost 14,000 people have registered their support and \$15,000 has been raised for the campaign, 22 organizations and 1,500 people have been briefed. To register support, go to www.lukeforward.com.

Freericks said the primary focus today is the environmental impact study, and he called it a complicated, long-lasting review.

Rusty Mitchell, director of the Community Initiatives Team at Luke, said he has been around long enough to see the evolution of Luke, Fighter Country Partnership and Talon.

"I can't tell you the difference, what it means to have the senior senator from Arizona here," he said. "It speaks volumes."

Mitchell said people would hear a lot of false, inaccurate information about the EIS. The first step was taken Dec. 28 with a notice of intent, Mitchell said. Next is a series of scoping meetings, open house events with no formal presentation at five locations. Experts will be present to talk to participants about infrastructure, noise, water, air range and space issues.

At the open houses, people can submit their concerns, and the contractor hired to take comments will work up the EIS document. Then, sometime in late fall, a draft EIS will be published and sent to all cities involved in the F-35 base siting process. Individuals will be able to download their own copy of the EIS.

Once the draft EIS is released, public hearings will be held, at which time, individuals can again make comments, which will be gathered and made part of the final environmental impact statement about 14 months later.

"Until that order is signed in 2011, there's no decision," Mitchell said. "Until the process is complete, there's no decision."

Scoping meetings are set to take place Feb. 22 to 26, and they will be advertised in all major newspapers, Mitchell said.

Steve Yamamori, CEO and Director of Fighter Country Partnership gave a financial review of the organization's fundraising activities and projected revenues for 2010.

In 2009, the organization raised \$97,180 for services on base; 87 cents of every dollar went to services (Luke Days brought in \$121,000). Revenues in 2009 were \$349,403 and projected revenues for 2010 were set at \$213,000.