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Deal to end home building near Arizona's Luke AFB

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LITCHFIELD PARK, Ariz.

Maricopa County officials agreed to stop new single-family home construction around Luke Air Force Base, a move that they hope will make the base a more attractive candidate for training pilots on the new F-35 fighter.

Thursday's agreement is a victory for the state and for communities near the base in the suburbs west of Phoenix that worry the base may close if urban encroachment prompts concerns about safety and noise.

Luke pumps \$2 billion a year into the economy. It is a training home for the F-16 fighter, which is being phased out.

The base's supporters hope a new mission training the next generation of fighter pilots would protect Luke for years.

"Our message today is clear to the decision makers in Washington: We stand ready for the F-35, and the state of Arizona will do all we can to make it happen," Gov. Jan Brewer said.

The settlement ends more than a year of legal battles between the county and the state Attorney General's Office.

The county refused to comply with a 2004 law prohibiting it from allowing construction in high-noise areas and accident-potential zones around the base and its auxiliary fields. It cited concerns about protecting the rights of private land owners in the affected areas.

The new agreement allows construction to continue on projects already under way, and it requires the state to defend any lawsuits filed against the county because of its compliance with state law.

Luke is one of a handful of facilities being considered for a secondary training base for F-35 pilots. Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson is also being considered, but Brewer said in October that Luke has a better shot at being selected.

Air Force officials have said they plan to narrow the list this spring and make a final decision early next year.

Luke boasts good flying weather, access to nearby practice ranges and extensive facilities for pilot training. The state and 10 communities near the base launched a lobbying and social-networking campaign in October to promote Luke for the F-35.

Luke has trained fighter pilots since it opened in 1941.

"It's a proud heritage, and it's one we want to continue into the future," said Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard.

Arizona has one of the nation's strongest laws guarding against Air Force base enforcement, Goddard said.