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Ellington Guard unit backed as vital to area

Group fights closure, cites security needs

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Keeping a Texas Air National Guard unit based at Ellington Field is vital to the security of Houston and the Gulf Coast region, the main reason the Department of Defense should not move the unit elsewhere, officials said Tuesday.

Ellington Field, instead, should be used as a joint military reserve base to house not only the 147th Fighter Wing of the Texas Air National Guard but also other reserve units and a homeland security office, members of the Ellington Field Task Force said during a morning news conference.

The task force, comprised of elected officials, business leaders and community members, is working to ensure that Ellington Field is not put on the Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, list as part of a cost-cutting move.

Ellington Field, Houston's only military air defense installation, is located 15 miles from downtown Houston at Texas 3 and FM 2351.

Task force members point to the 147th unit as being necessary to secure and protect the Houston area from terrorist attacks. Houston is one of seven cities designated most likely to be attacked by terrorists, according to Homeland Security officials.

"Our city can clear our skies in seven minutes because we have the 147th Fighter Wing here," Houston City Council member Shelley Sekula-Gibbs said. In referring to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she pointed out that the nearest fighter wing unit to New York City is 30 minutes away and the closest fighter wing unit to Washington, D.C., is 20 minutes away.

Houston does not want to risk being exposed to a terrorist attack and "have the 147th National Guard be pulled away from us," she said.

Officials point to the importance of keeping the 147th unit in Houston rather than consolidating it with military bases in San Antonio or Corpus Christi, as has been suggested. If it were moved, it would take 10 to 15 minutes to reach Houston -- a lifetime during a crisis.

Fighter jets are kept on alert around the clock at Ellington Field.

Those wanting to keep the fighter wing at Ellington Field say the unit would be protecting not only the city of Houston but vital entities throughout the area such as the Port of Houston, petrochemical companies, the Texas Medical Center, NASA's Johnson Space Center, the South Texas Nuclear Power plant, offshore oil rigs and the planned bio-defense lab in Galveston.

"All of these are extremely important not only to this area, but each in its own way is important for the whole U.S. economy and the world stability. From the standpoint of homeland security, there cannot be a more important objective," said John Martinec, the task force chairman.

The task force is awaiting a list of criteria that will be used to implement the BRAC plan.

Glenn Flood, a spokesman for the Defense Department, said the criteria must be published in the federal register by Dec. 31. There then will be a 60-day public comment period, and the final criteria will be available by Feb. 16.

President Bush is scheduled to name a nine-member BRAC commission by March 15, 2005.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld must provide a list of military installations recommended for base closings or realignment by May 16, 2005. The commission will follow with its recommendations by Sept. 8, 2005.

Final base closings or realignments are scheduled for late 2005.

Eugene Tulich, chairman of the Houston Military Affairs Committee and an Ellington Field Task Force member, said discussions are under way to consider moving the Army Reserve 75th Division, located on Old Spanish Trail, to Ellington Field.

The Army Reserve unit's 17-acre facility is being sought by the Texas Medical Center.

Aside from the 147th Fighter wing, Ellington is home to a Texas Army National Guard unit and a Coast Guard unit that flies search-and-rescue helicopters.

The 2,200-acre complex also houses private aircraft, a NASA facility that uses a plane known as the "vomit comet" to condition astronauts to weightlessness, and Continental Express, a commuter service to Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Ellington Field is unlike other military bases because the city of Houston owns about 2,000 acres, including the runways and control tower. The military owns another 200 acres for its installation and pays a fee to use the airport.

Ellington Field dates to World War I, when it housed the largest aviation training facility in the nation. The complex was razed by fire in 1927, rebuilt in 1941 and used as an Air Force base during World War II.

A joint-use agreement between the city and federal government was signed in 1984.