

OLF forces collar Navy

By BILL SANDIFER, Staff Writer

SWAN QUARTER — Although opponents of a practice Navy airfield weren't allowed to speak Tuesday during a Hyde County information meeting, they did briefly corral Navy officials as they left the session.

The meeting was the first of five slated for the next few weeks as the Navy lays out its plans to continue court-ordered supplemental environmental studies, required before substantial work can continue on an outlying landing field proposed for eastern North Carolina.

Residents and officials from Beaufort, Washington and Perquimans counties had turned out to monitor the Navy's presentation, asking questions and offering opinions following the meeting.

Jennifer Allgood, chairman of the grassroots opposition group North Carolinians Opposed to the Outlying Landing Field, asked why the Navy continues to spend millions on a North Carolina OLF when a recent decision by the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission may result in the closing of Naval Air Station Oceana, the base the OLF will serve.

"Right now," said Allgood, "the BRAC's telling you to figure out what you're going to do in Oceana or move out, and you're still putting money in."

"Actually," said Cmdr. Rick Keyes, "the BRAC commission has put the onus on the (Virginia Beach) government. The Navy has no control over development of private lands outside (Oceana)."

"Well, you have control of our development," said Allgood, "so don't tell me you don't have control over development."

The Navy has already condemned one Washington County landowner and has threatened to condemn others, a tack it has, so far, been unwilling to use in Virginia to roll back development surrounding Oceana. That action, however, has now been mandated by the BRAC Commission if Virginia is to keep its master jet base status.

"Why don't you take care of Oceana and Fentress (its associated practice field) and get that straight instead of coming down here?" asked Frances Armstrong. "Get rid of the houses up there. Why come down here and try to get rid of ours?"

Although Virginia Beach has taken most of the heat for failure to control encroaching development, the Navy has also been blamed for overlooking development on thousands of acres on which it purchased easements to restrict just such development. The Navy angered many residents and business owners when it did begin an 11th-hour move to enforce easements it had acquired reportedly as early as 20 years ago.

Regarding widespread allegations — supported by internal Navy documents revealed under court order — that politics played heavily into a decision to locate a noisy OLF in North Carolina, Perquimans County activist John Long said, "We understand politics have a lot to do with it. ... You've took your pollution, and you've come across the state line and dumped it here. And we can't even vote against you."

Among a host of elected officials, U.S. Sen. John Warner of Virginia has emerged as the OLF poster child. A key plank in his lobbying platform designed to save Oceana is a call to fast-track OLF construction at the Navy's preferred Washington-Beaufort county site.

"It's kind of like you're coming down and jamming it down our throat," said Long, "and we're going to take your land ... and that's just not (right). We're taxpayers."

The recent BRAC hearings have heightened local residents' awareness of the impermanence of military installations.

"Say Oceana leaves," said Long, "now what have you done? Now you got an airfield, and now you don't want to use it anymore. The Navy has done it in so many other places; you've come, and you've built things ... and (there's) bases you don't even use anymore. Why do you want to put an OLF down here when you can stay in Virginia and use it there."

One resident asked Navy officials why, when they had started with a clean slate in Virginia, they now expected North Carolina to bail them out.

"Back in '93," said Armstrong, "when y'all decided to go to Oceana and close Cecil Field, it was because you had Fentress. You said you had the OLF there; 'We can use it.' And now you're saying you can't. Why didn't you keep it so you could use it?"

Keyes laid the issue at BRAC's doorstep, adding, "I don't think we should get into a whole debate over that because Cecil Field had an OLF; Oceana has an OLF, and we still use that OLF; and we plan to use that. ... We fully plan to continue to use Navy Fentress."

Although the Virginia government has offered use of existing remote Virginia airfields, Navy officials continue to maintain the facilities don't meet their selection criteria. However, the selection of Washington County as its preferred site, the Navy has conceded, succeeded only because the Navy changed its own criteria, expanding its original distance cutoff beyond 50 nautical miles.

Washington County is about 73 miles away from Oceana. Fort Pickett, one site offered by Virginia, is about 92 miles from Oceana.

Residents also picked at a sore point the Navy has found — as its documents reveal — difficult to defend: breaking up, or split-siting, the 10 squadrons that would ordinarily fly out of a single base.

"Split-siting isn't supposed to be good, is it," asked Armstrong.

"It depends on your definition of good," replied Keyes. "Relative to what?"

The Navy conceded split-siting is not strategically desirable but was chosen for environmental reasons.

The base closure board has also faulted the Navy for its decision to break up the squadrons.

"Even the BRAC says split-siting is economically unfeasible," said Alligood. "Our country right now is in a terrible, terrible situation economically, and you totally ignore the fact that what you're doing is putting us more in the hole — \$200 million for something you're not even sure you're going to have (in the long run)."

During the August hearings, a BRAC analyst briefed the board and military representatives on his analysis of Oceana's future as a master jet base, contending the installation is not capable of handling the next-generation Joint Strike Fighter — the F-35 — slated for deployment to Oceana beginning in 2010. The proposed Washington County OLF is not scheduled for full operation until 2010. That date now will likely be pushed back because of court-imposed and other delays.

A look at other issues brought up following Tuesday's meeting will appear in later editions.