

Navy League Approach to BRAC Makes Everyone a Winner

Many Navy League councils inevitably will feel the impact of the next round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC), the Pentagon process to consolidate or close an additional 20 percent of the nation's military installation infrastructure, generate an estimated \$7 billion annually in savings and convert excess capacity into warfighting capability.

As Navy League members, we do not oppose Defense Department and Navy and Marine Corps efforts to reduce excess capacity. Every sea service dollar spent to maintain unneeded bases is a dollar not available to buy the ships, aircraft and weapons needed by our sailors and Marines to fight the global war on terrorism. But many Navy League councils are taking a positive approach to BRAC by increasing the value of their bases to the Pentagon and making them better places to live and work. This is in keeping with the Navy League's strong support of our sea services.

The BRAC process is under way and headed toward a November 2005 decision that will lead to growth for some military towns as others face closure of their bases and volatile changes in their local economies.

Closing military bases has been a scaring issue in the military community since 1988, when the Pentagon conducted the first BRAC round to rid the services of excess installations. However, during the next 11 years, the services cut end strength by 36 percent, exacerbating their overcapacity problems. Three additional BRAC rounds followed in 1991, 1993 and 1995.

The next round of BRAC will be far different from the previous rounds that led to the closing of hundreds of bases and facilities ranging from the Navy Shipyard, Long Beach, Calif., to the Naval Air Reserve Center in Olathe, Kan. BRAC remains controversial. In mid-May, the House Armed Services Committee voted to delay the 2005 round for two years, but support for that step from other sectors of Congress was uncertain.

The goal in 2005 is not simply to deal with overcapacity, but to totally reorganize the installation infrastructure of the services. The key factor that will drive BRAC decisions is joint warfighting. Bases that can contribute to joint training and readiness will have an intrinsic advantage during the 2005 struggle for survival. Other survival factors are: room for growth, especially in the airspace associated with each facility, diversity of terrain, operational costs and environmental impact. To ensure maximum joint use of installations in the future, the Pentagon has created seven Joint Cross-Service Groups (JCSGs) to assess the capabilities of installations in certain support areas: medical activities, intelligence, education and training, industrial activities, supply and storage, technical and headquarters, and support activities. For example, the JCSGs will assess the practicality of combining pilot training for all services at fewer bases and consolidating military depots.

In March 2005, the president will nominate a changed BRAC Commission to deal with the Pentagon's changed BRAC priorities. The commission will be expanded from eight to nine members and alterations to the Pentagon's cut list will require seven votes rather than a simple majority, as in the past.

Once the commission is in place, the process will be similar to that of previous BRAC rounds. In May 2005, the Secretary of Defense will give the commission a list of bases recommended for closure. That September, the commission will forward its own rec-

ommendations to the president, who can accept or reject the list in toto. If the president accepts, he sends the list to Congress.

The process was designed to diminish political pressure on the commission as the BRAC cut lists are compiled.

Navy League councils that would like to know more about BRAC should tap the huge information resources available, such as the Pentagon BRAC

site, www.defenselink.mil/brac, and the Navy BRAC site at www.defenselink.mil/brac/navy. In some instances, BRAC commissioners would be required to visit an installation, opening the way for bases to demonstrate that they would be vital in the future.

Councils should ignore the fake BRAC lists that appear on the Internet and resist the urge to hire costly consultants. But councils don't have to go it alone. Some states have created umbrella organizations of groups to support local bases. My home state of Georgia has created the Governor's Military Affairs Committee to add value to bases here. There also are regional organizations, such as the First District BRAC Task Force in Virginia.

Some states are spending millions to protect their installations by upgrading the roads, schools and sewer systems that serve the bases, and creating a better quality of life for service members. Still others are marketing their installations as joint warfighting bases that can accommodate huge numbers from more than one service.

Councils should be thoroughly familiar with the cross-service areas of interest, such as medical and education, and emphasize in-kind facilities nearby, including research institutions, universities and hospitals. Public support is not on the Pentagon's list of selection criteria, but one expert says past BRAC commissions were moved when the local citizenry lined the roads and cheered for their bases during commission visits.

One thing that failed to sway past commissions is a community plea to keep a base open because of the economic hardships closure could bring. Many military towns believe that closure equals economic ruin. But BRAC commissioners know of the successes that have followed base closures. Closed in 1993, the Charleston Naval Base in South Carolina today is home to 90 private, state and federal organizations, and the local community has created 4,500 new jobs linked to that facility.

BRAC 2005 is a unique, though painful, process to reduce overcapacity, help our sea services in their transformation into a better, more efficient fighting force and strengthen our nation. The Navy League and its councils have a rich history of support for installations in their communities. Our involvement with BRAC is to improve the quality of life for sea service families and increase the value of our bases. That is a "win-win" strategy for all. ■



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