Sacramento is Broken—The Bond Fiasco Proves It

The last round of military base closures was especially tough on California’s—and L.A.’s—defense industry. Between 1988 and 1995, 29 major installations, and 95,000 jobs, were lost in our state due to base closures, by far the most of any state.

Base closures everywhere leave a severe impact on local economies. Decades of economic growth and stability (not to mention a community’s identity) are simply eliminated when base closures occur. It is a tough price to pay for living in a post-Cold War world where the threats to national security originate from faceless terror networks and unforeseen hits on our economy.

The Pentagon is seeking to save $7 billion in the next round of base closures. That is a worthwhile goal. Amid ever-changing budget priorities and new defense strategies, the federal government needs to keep looking for ways to effectively manage limited resources. And a new military strategy for the 21st century just may not require as many bases as before. But these cuts must be shared around the country—not just focused on places like California.

With the next round of closures only a few months away, it looks like we might have some hope left to protect the Los Angeles Air Force Base. Last week, President Bush announced his nominations for the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission. For its chair, he selected San Diego resident Anthony Principi, who previously served as Secretary of Veterans Affairs. And House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi did us a great service in nominating L.A. County resident Phillip Coyle, a former Undersecretary of Defense.

However, we cannot rest on that alone. The last rounds of closures resulted in bases closing in California despite having Californians on the commission. We must make our case for retaining LAAFB, and make it clearly.

Most military bases are very visible with large runways, barracks, and industrial installations. Not so with the LAAFB.

If it were not for a sign on the side of the 405 Freeway in El Segundo, most of us would never know there even is an air force base in the South Bay. It has no planes, no jets, and no visible operations as one would see and hear near Edwards AFB or Vandenberg AFB. Instead, LAAFB is home to an elaborate missile defense system and meteorology center that provides vital, up-to-the-second information to our troops worldwide, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite this lack of major infrastructure, the LAAFB provides 112,000 jobs in California, 47,000 of those in L.A. County. The Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation estimates that this base alone generates $16 billion in economic activity throughout the state.

These jobs and the resulting economic activity are causing other states to lick their chops with envy. Influential senators from Colorado and New Mexico are contending that the operations performed at LAAFB complement similar operations performed at bases in their states. However, no region in the country can guarantee a defense industry workforce as highly skilled as L.A.’s, nor can those states realistically compare their infrastructures and economies to ours, which provide LAAFB the services it needs in its own backyard. I cannot imagine LAAFB contractors like Northrop Grumman, Boeing and Raytheon suddenly relocating tens of thousands of jobs from the world’s 17th largest economy to a remote base in the Rockies or Sangre de Christo mountains.

But as we have seen in previous BRAC processes, politics is an overwhelming factor in determining which bases stay and which bases are closed. Fortunately, public officials from the South Bay have effectively rallied statewide, bipartisan support for protecting this unique military facility. It is reassuring to see prominent Democrats like Rep. Jane Harman and Redondo Beach City Councilmember John Parsons working closely with County Supervisor Don Knabe and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on this top business priority.

BRAC has until May 15 to present their recommendations to the Pentagon, which will in turn announce base closures on Sept. 8 of this year.

The Business Perspective is a weekly award-winning opinion column by Rusty Hammer, President & CEO, LA Area Chamber
For the LA Area Chamber, protecting LA Air Force Base is a top priority. Members of the Torrance Area Chamber will be joining us on our annual lobbying trip to Washington, D.C. on April 17-20, where lobbying our congressional delegation to get behind LAAFB will be a central mission.

If you cannot join us in D.C. next month, at least be sure you let your federal elected officials know that protecting L.A. Air Force Base is the most important thing they can do this year to help our economy, securing tens of thousands of well paying jobs that support local businesses and tax coffers.

And that's the Business Perspective.

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