



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: F35B additions to Cherry Point generate debate along the coast

By CED Program Interns & Students

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/f35b-additions-to-cherry-point-generate-debate-along-the-coast/>

This entry was posted on June 24, 2010 and is filed under Carolina Economic Revitalization Corps (CERC)

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There's controversy in the air these days along the North Carolina coast. Last week the Navy held the last of three public hearings on its proposed basing of 8 squadrons of F35B Joint Strike Fighters at the Cherry Point Marine Corps base in Havelock. The Navy is considering four potential basing plans for 13 squadrons of F-35Bs. The plans split the squadrons between Cherry Point and the Marine Corps air base in Beaufort, SC, with the preferred plan putting 8 of the 13 squadrons at Cherry Point.

The plan is generating a lot of support among coastal residents who see Cherry Point as an important economic engine for the region. But other residents oppose the basing plan, raising concerns about noise, diminishing property values, and threats to the quality of life in these quiet coastal communities. The noise issue is not insignificant. At 16 jets per squadron, basing 8 squadrons at Cherry Point would mean 128 added jets. Residents in Oriental, a small town near the southern tip of Pamlico County, worry that the increased—and louder—jet traffic will hurt tourism and property values in Oriental, which is directly in the flightpath from the Cherry Point runway.

On the other side of the issue, many advocates of economic development in Pamlico County support bringing F35Bs to Cherry Point. The air base is already an important part of the area's economy. Basing the jets here will increase military personnel by an estimated 1,200. In addition, the base will require major physical overhauls to prepare it for the additional people and planes, meaning that the basing plan will generate hundreds of construction jobs over the next several years. Beyond that, the expansion of the base will stimulate an increase in support services; local economic planners hope Pamlico County businesses will be able to fill that need. The basing plan will also help secure Cherry Point's position as an important site for the Navy, and in an era of tight budgets and uncomfortable cuts, every hedge against any potential closure is welcome.

The Cherry Point debate is specific to this area, but it points to a larger tension that is frequently a part of economic development efforts: how can small towns both bring in substantial new business (or military) developments, while also maintaining their culture and small-town character? In this case, the concern is about how added noise will change a quiet and rural area where enjoyment of the natural environment is an important part of the community's culture. In other communities the questions are about the speed of population growth, or about opening a new big-box store into the area, or about wooing a manufacturing plant that will bring environmental threats along with jobs. The communities near Cherry Point are asking, just as any small town facing the proposal of a large development must ask: will this change us?

What do you think? How much new growth is too much? Are the important questions not "should we pursue growth" but "how should we pursue it" and "how fast"? How can a town invite economic growth without losing its character? Is a change in character really even a loss at all, or is it only part of the inevitable evolution that all communities go through? These questions don't have easy answers, but they're inescapable for any town trying to find the right balance between change and continuity.