

Stakes get higher for D-M noise critics



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The budget fight in Congress over the planned retirement of the A-10 attack jet has reignited the debate over aircraft noise from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and renewed fears that louder jets will soon fly here.

For now, both D-M supporters and neighborhood noise critics are on the same side of one issue — both want the Air Force to keep the A-10 at the local air base.

But neighborhood critics and groups such as Tucson Forward oppose basing louder planes such as the F-16 Fighting Falcon and the much louder next-generation F-35 stealth fighter at D-M — even though experts say D-M's future could be in jeopardy if it doesn't win such new flying missions.

Robin Gomez, who represents the midtown Colonia Solana neighborhood on a local military-community relations committee, said he and other neighborhood advocates don't want to see D-M closed, but its missions must be compatible with affected neighborhoods.

Warnings that D-M could close if new jets aren't based there amount to fear tactics by D-M backers, Gomez said. He contends that units at D-M such as the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group — the Air Force's main aircraft-storage facility, known as "The Boneyard" — are too valuable to move.

"We're assuming the base is not going to close because of the Boneyard," Gomez said, adding that the base should pursue new missions such as cyber warfare and remote drone piloting to replace A-10 operation.

The stakes are high on both sides of the issue.

Base supporters, led by the DM50 and the Southern Arizona Defense Alliance, say that the Air Force's plan to retire the A-10 would cost the community more than 2,000 of the base's nearly 9,000 jobs and slash D-M's annual local economic impact, estimated at \$973 million last year.

If D-M is passed over in future F-35 basing decisions, backers say, its mission would be diminished and it would be more vulnerable to closure as the Pentagon seeks to cut overcapacity. A new round of the Base Realignment and Closing Commission (BRAC) process could happen as soon as 2016, observers say.

Neighborhood advocates concerned about jet noise and safety say the A-10C Thunderbolt II “Warthogs” now based at D-M — the Air Force’s quietest fighter jet — are tolerable.

But they vehemently oppose plans to base more of the louder F-16 fighters at D-M as the A-10s are retired, as well as basing the F-35 here.

Under the Air Force’s plan — so far stymied by Congress — D-M would lose three squadrons of 83 A-10Cs and gain one 21-plane Reserve squadron of F-16s by 2019.

Operation Snowbird

Plans to base louder planes at D-M worry **Rita Ornelas**, who lives with some of the worst jet noise at her home in the Julia Keen Neighborhood. Initially built in the 1950s and ’60s, Julia Keen lies just beyond the northwest end of D-M’s runway, in the highest noise and safety-risk zones.

Ornelas describes the near-daily routine of A-10 “Warthog” attack jets taking off and landing over the neighborhood in the morning and again in the afternoon, one after another.

“The A-10s are a pain in the butt, but we tolerate them,” she said during a visit to her neighborhood, as A-10s thundered overhead.

The louder F-16s and the much louder F-35 are another matter. A small squadron of F-16s based at D-M are on alert for homeland-security duty, using engine afterburners on takeoff over the city.

“They make this thunderous noise when taking off — it shakes your house, it shakes the ground, it shakes you,” Ornelas said.

Besides the homeland-security planes, F-16s from the Air National Guard 162nd Fighter Wing at Tucson International Airport occasionally fly in to D-M to be loaded with live munitions before training missions.

Visiting aircraft participating in Operation Snowbird — a joint training exercise that was expanded around 2002 — can create an even bigger noise problem, Ornelas and other neighborhood advocates say.

Louder planes, including F-18 Super Hornets, Marine Corps’ Harrier attack planes, and foreign Harriers and Tornado fighters have visited D-M as part of Operation Snowbird, which is hosted by D-M and managed by the 162nd Air Guard.

So-called “transient” aircraft can also rattle neighborhoods. Ornelas recalls one day last September when a group of eight F-18s stopped at D-M to refuel.

“It was terrible — the noise was continuous for 20 minutes,” she recalled.

Davis-Monthan has tried its best to stay engaged with the community and adjust its operations to minimize disruptions, said **Scott Hines**, D-M’s chief community liaison.

He noted that the base altered flight patterns and altitudes to the limits of safety to reduce noise over neighborhoods in response to the 2006 recommendations of a military-community compatibility committee. As a result, aircraft fly 86 percent higher over populated areas.

The base also changed helicopter routes, rerouted night flights and increased the use of airfields at Fort Huachuca and Gila Bend for practice landings.

But critics say D-M operations still are disruptive at times, and the arrival of the F-35 — which is about two to seven times louder than the loudest version of the F-16 used at TIA — would greatly expand the zone in which jet noise is considered “intrusive.” Last year, 19 Tucson neighborhood associations signed a letter strongly opposing any plan to bring F-35s to Tucson.

If the F-35 comes to D-M or the Air Guard base at TIA, Gomez said, densely populated neighborhoods surrounding the bases will suffer quality-of-life damage from noise, health issues — and increased safety risk.

In contrast, Gomez asserted that members of D-M support groups including the DM50 and the recently formed Southern Arizona Defense Alliance typically live far from jet-noise problems.

Brian Harpel, president of the DM50, acknowledged that he doesn’t live near enough to D-M’s flight paths to deal with serious noise issues, but he sees the base’s survival as a matter of economic security for Tucson, as well as a national-security issue.

“I don’t live under there, I don’t contend with the noise, I’ll be the first to admit that,” said Harpel, a commercial real estate broker. “But at the same time, I value D-M, I value our airmen and what they do across the world to keep us free.”

Inn owner anxious

D-M overflights already cover much of the city as the normal traffic patterns extend out over much of midtown, including Reid Park and higher-rent historic neighborhoods like Sam Hughes.

Susan Banner bought a historic house in the Sam Hughes neighborhood in 1999, just east of the University of Arizona, and in 2000 she opened it as a four-room bed and breakfast. At the time, flight operations over the house — more than three miles from D-M’s runway — were not a major concern, Banner said.

“It was a very random nuisance for the first five years, I’d say,” she said.

But as time wore on, the flights increased and so did the noise.

“It’s like a skin rash — it creeps up on you,” Banner said.

Banner plans to retire in the next few years and worries she will have trouble selling the inn, which was built in 1931, but she says she’s more concerned about the future of Tucson as a whole.

D-M’s backers often say “urban encroachment” threatens D-M and ask why those upset by jet noise don’t simply move away if they don’t like it.

First jets came in 1953

Charles Lindbergh helped dedicate what was then called Davis-Monthan Field in 1927, and it was used for civilian and military operations until converting solely to military use around 1941. D-M hosted heavy propeller-driven bombers during World War II, and the first jets didn’t come to D-M until 1953, when B-47 Stratojet strategic bombers and F-86A Sabre fighter jets arrived.

Neighborhood advocates say it’s D-M that has encroached on the city, pointing out that many Tucson neighborhoods were built well before D-M became a full-time military base.

But up until at least the mid-1950s, D-M still had a miles-wide buffer of desert between the base and most other development to the northwest, D-M’s Hines said.

The oldest subdivision in the Julia Keen Neighborhood was built in 1953 — then mostly surrounded by desert — and initially served as private, off-base military housing.

Keen Elementary School was built around the same time and taught neighborhood kids until Tucson Unified School District closed it despite widespread community opposition in 2004. The closure was approved by TUSD’s board at the urging of the D-M and the DM50, who feared it would hurt the base’s chances in the last base-closing round in 2005, according to district documents.

“Nobody had an idea”

Anne Gomez and her husband, Robin, moved into their Colonia Solana home near Reid Park in 2000 after inheriting it from her father. She said her father bought the land in 1953 and built the house in 1973.

“Nobody had an idea in ’53 what kind of airplanes they would be bringing in,” Anne Gomez said.

Robin Gomez, a former real estate agent in Virginia, said many people bought their homes before the state began requiring homebuyers to sign disclosures that a property was in a “military airport” zone.

Many of the homes in the Julia Keen neighborhood were passed down through generations, and many current owners can't afford to move elsewhere, said Ornelas. Though some of Julia Keen's mainly slump-block homes and condos are a little run-down, many are well-maintained and attractively landscaped.

Ornelas said that selling out and moving is not a viable financial option in the current market for her and many others.

"They say, 'if you don't like it why don't you get out?' How am I going to get out? How am I going to sell my house?" she said. "I'm 66 years old, I was disabled, now I'm retired. My husband just died, what am I supposed to do?"