

Ellsworth protection group works to ensure base stays open

If Sen. John Thune and other members of the South Dakota congressional delegation forged new ground in their work to keep Ellsworth Air Force Base from closure in 2005, the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority is doing the same to keep it from happening again.

While nothing is ever certain, Executive Director Scott Landguth said they are doing everything in their power to keep Ellsworth off any future Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, list.

And that includes taking everything that made Ellsworth a candidate for closure in 2005 and making it better.

"We fix what we can," Landguth said.

Glen Kane, managing director for the state agency created in 2009 under then-Gov. Mike Rounds' Office of Economic Development, said the important thing that came out of the BRAC process was the criteria used by the Department of Defense and the Commission to justify closing Ellsworth, including scoring documents that pit it against the country's other B-1 base, Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene, Texas.

They are using that information to help improve the base and surrounding areas.

"We're on the offensive," Kane said. "The checklist basically gave us a playbook to work from."

And they have taken that playbook and run with it.

The expanded Powder River Training Complex was huge, said Landguth. The SDEDA also helped create a mock village for the complex in 2014 to aid in training operations.

Thune, who fought diligently to get the base off the closure list in 2005, said the SDEDA has been an effective partner in advocating for the work by the men and women on the base and in helping the surrounding community.

"It has taken a forward-thinking approach to serving the base and surrounding community by supporting the expanded Powder River Training Complex, funding a Close Air Support training site, and promoting compatible development around the base," Thune said.

To promote compatible development, the SDEDA recently completed its 50th purchase through an initiative to work with willing sellers who own property in the accident potential zone, or the most likely place for a B-1B to crash. Encroachment in this area would be a factor that future BRAC commissions would consider.

Through the initiative, they have protected 2,480 acres including land north of the base that remains in use for cattle operations.

The land north of the base is mostly agricultural, but homes and businesses are prevalent to the south. Acquiring that land has been slightly more tedious, but Kane is confident in their ability to not only secure the land, but to have the property owners that sell it walk away happy.

"Anybody we've done business with walks away with a smile," Kane said. "We believe at some point there will be no encroachment in the APZ."

The group has recently finished a Joint Land Use Study as well. This study is basically a collaborative planning effort for the base, the cities of Box Elder and Rapid City, and Pennington and Meade counties. The work of the study aims to encourage cooperative land use by the base and surrounding communities and provide tools and strategies for local jurisdictions and the base to avoid future compatibility issues.

The SDEDA also saved the base the work and expense of overhauling their wastewater treatment system when the old one faced some regulatory issues. In 2014, the group built and currently maintains through a contractor, a wastewater treatment plant that serves the base and Box Elder.

Col. Bradley Cochran, vice commander of the 28th Bomb Wing said the efforts by the SDEDA have been, "incredibly helpful in the continued success of the 28th Bomb Wing."

"They have been valuable partners as we overhauled our wastewater treatment processes, established an enhanced use lease agreement, which enables us to more fully utilize base resources, and have aided in the expansion of our local airspace, among other ventures. We look forward to working with them in the future on similar projects," Cochran said.

Not only do they work to help protect the viability of the base for official military operations, but they also work to improve the quality of life for people living on base or just outside of it in Box Elder.

They own Freedom Estates, a 230-acre parcel of land south of I-90's Exit 67 and north of Highway 1416 being developed for various housing options, including single-family homes and eventually possible multi-family units and even commercial space.

About 24 homes have been built and several families recently moved in.

Alysha Gregg's husband is stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base and after living in base housing for several years with her husband and three children, the family recently purchased their first home at Freedom Landing.

"I love living in this area because it's close to both the base and has easy access when I do need to make a trip to Rapid City," Gregg said. "We are first-time home buyers, and I think we were really lucky to have such a great location and great value in our brand new home."

In an effort to give residents more options for shopping and dining, the development authority also created Ellsworth Business Park in 2014 which is certified as a ready site by the SD Office of Economic Development.

The park is just outside the base entrance on Ellsworth Road and south of Liberty Boulevard and there are more than 40 lots of various zoning from general commercial to office commercial and light industrial.

Currently, Dollar General is the only business located there, but residents say it has been a big help when they need to make a quick stop for cooking staples or even school supplies.

"I shop there because the hours work for our schedule," Gregg said. "It's the closest place to get something quick and it's not expensive. It's better than driving around to on base or all the way to town if I just need something quick."

The group also recently donated land that will be the site of a future sports complex in Box Elder.

The South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority is a unique organization in that most bases with anything similar are done through a local Chamber of Commerce and don't have quite the capabilities the SDEDA has because it is a government organization.

Sen. Mike Rounds was South Dakota's governor at the time of the 2005 BRAC and said they identified the need for such an organization at that time.

"While working as governor, we identified a need and an opportunity to create the Ellsworth Development Authority," he said.

He said their goals are to enable Ellsworth to continue providing economic benefits in South Dakota and continue its vital role in our national security.

"To date, I believe the Authority has done an excellent job of fulfilling these goals," Rounds said.

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