



The Defense Support Initiative
of Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Walton Counties

Washington DC Strategic Community Support

By Jim Heald, DSI Chairman

Your EDC Defense Support Initiative (DSI) representatives just returned from our annual visit to Washington, DC with the Northwest Florida Defense Coalition. Once again, I was privileged to be a part of the 55 person group that traveled to Washington to meet with our Congressional Delegation and various Pentagon Leaders on 13 and 14 May. As is typical, the hard work that went into preparing for the trip ensured the visit was productive and informative.

A little background is important. As you know, chartered by the EDC, the DSI is made up of about 25 community leaders from the tri-county region encompassing the Eglin Ranges. We have representatives from Team Santa Rosa including a Santa Rosa County Commissioner, from Okaloosa County including an Okaloosa County Commissioner, from Walton County, from the Defense Industry, from nine Military Affairs Committees, retired military members, and an ex-officio (non-voting) member from Eglin AFB. Each year we develop a federal legislative agenda which is described in a point paper which is shared with the local military commanders, all of the organizations that are represented on the DSI, the speakers that participate in the meetings in Washington, and our Congressional Delegation and their staffs. This paper is available on our website at <http://www.florida-edc.org/defense.htm>. It takes a lot of input to develop this paper. At the suggestion of MG Eidsaune (former Commander of the Air Armament Center), this year we started a new program where we assigned a DSI liaison to each of the local Commanders to solicit their input, to share our thoughts, and to try to coordinate community and military priorities. I believe you will see we were quite successful in aligning the major thrusts by comparing the point paper with the documents that came out of Eglin's Vision 2015 efforts from earlier this year.

While it is great to speak with one voice from the tri-county region, this annual visit to Washington, DC carries even more weight when traveling as a five-county regional delegation. In 2005, the five counties of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay joined together in an alliance identified as the Northwest Florida Defense Coalition to represent community-related defense interests in support of all bases in the Panhandle Region. Our mission statement is *“To strategically support and enhance Northwest Florida’s military installations, missions and national security strategies by diversifying our economic development efforts and building upon existing military missions and current defense industry infrastructure in order to consolidate our strengths and commonalities to become one of the most viable and progressive regions in America.”*

Representatives Jeff Miller and Allen Boyd co-hosted our trip. Once again, their staffs did an outstanding job in preparing for the visit and aligning a great set of speakers. Both Rep Miller

The Defense Support Initiative
of Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Walton Counties

and Rep Boyd spent a considerable amount of time with us. They also arranged for Senator Bill Nelson and Senator Mel Martinez to share their thoughts. Since we had issues dealing with transportation, Rep John Mica (ranking member on Transportation and Infrastructure) spoke with us. Rep Ron Klein spoke with us about catastrophic fund legislation (formerly a FL State Senator who worked the insurance legislation). Rep Jo Bonner, Alabama 1st District, also spoke with us about common issues such as the Air Force Tanker procurement. It was obvious that our point paper and concerns had been used to prepare the Congressional Delegation for meeting with us. This year, we met in the brand new Capitol Visitors Center in the North Congressional Meeting Room. What a great facility! I highly recommend anyone visiting Washington to spend some time in the Visitors Center.

We carried six main issues to Washington this year. The first dealt with the implementation of the BRAC 2005 additions to our communities. While the Defense Threat Reduction Agency move is already completed, the construction in preparation for the addition of the Joint Strike Fighter F-35 Joint Integrated Training Center and the movement of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) is just getting underway. You can read about all of our concerns and recommendations in the point paper, but I want to highlight three overarching concerns: ensuring compatible mission-to-mission use of the range for all existing and new missions; fully funding all BRAC-related mission needs; and fully funding all BRAC-related growth impacts on the surrounding communities.

Our second main issue was with non-BRAC related Infrastructure Needs. These concerns and recommendations revolve around housing privatization, transportation infrastructure, the overall health of the base infrastructure, and advocacy for a Vet Center in Okaloosa County to provide readjustment counseling and outreach services for our veterans.

Our third issue dealt with the long-term viability of our Gulf Range Complex to support a diverse mission set. We expressed concerns and recommendations on funding for current operations and for improvement and modernization programs. We advocated for the Gulf Regional Airspace Strategic Initiative to study how to best partition and schedule all of the vast airspace resources throughout the region while supporting military, commercial, and general aviation needs. We supported funding for the FAA to establish and fund a new control tower at the Destin Airport.

Out-grants, enhanced use lease process, and land conveyance comprised our fourth issue. With over 100 out-grants around the Eglin complex, we advocated for process improvements that both protected the military missions while simultaneously providing access to the communities for mutually beneficial land use. Major projects that were discussed include the Mid-Bay Bridge Connector, the Highway 98 Bypass, and the Emerald Coast Technology and Research Center to name just a few.

Military Spouses and Workforce Issues is another subject we have been working for several years. A highly successful pilot program called "Heroes at Home" was recommended for continuing on a permanent basis. The Eglin and Hurlburt experiences with this program not only showed the benefits, but also made these programs in our communities the most successful across the nation.

The Defense Support Initiative
of Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Walton Counties

Finally, we highlighted a national problem of encroachment around airports and military training sites by showing how a successful program can be managed. We advocated for expansion of the model used at Naval Air Station Whiting Field where local planning/zoning boards, state agencies (Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Forestry), federal agencies (Department of Defense and individual services), and conservancy groups (The Nature Conservancy) all work together for a common solution that helps multiple goals.

As part of our advocacy of these initiatives, not only did we meet with the Congressional Delegation, but we also met with representatives from the Pentagon Leadership. Vice Admiral Mike Vitale and Col Joe Schwarz met with us for Navy and Air Force installation issues respectively. Col Mark Gorton, Deputy Commander, spoke to us about the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and Mr. Dan Kunec discussed the F-35 program status. Capt Mike Good showed us the latest Littoral Combat Ship activity, which is being built in Mobile and will shortly be doing initial sea trials in the Gulf waters. Mr. Jack Manclark gave us his Air Force Test and Evaluation perspective. You can see many of the briefings at <http://www.florida-edc.org/defense.htm#NWFDC>.

All-in-all, this was another outstanding trip. A lot of people worked hard behind the scenes for many months to make the trip as productive as it was. There are too many to thank in this short article, but one person always stands out as the person we owe the most thanks to. Once again, our own Kay Rasmussen deserves our heartfelt appreciation for all she does to make this trip happen. I am pleased with our results so far, but I know we now must follow-up as the federal budget and legislative processes continue.

And we are already preparing for next year ...

Jim Heald is the 2009 DSI Chairman and can be contacted through Kay Rasmussen, Director of Defense & Economic Initiatives for the EDC at 850-362-6467, or kayr@florida-edc.org.