

DIFFERENT CAMPS

Conservation group and Eglin at odds over plan to build military housing at Camp Pinchot

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EGLIN AFB — A new study looking at impacts of building military housing on Air Force land is in, but the concern it's generating strongly resembles tension produced by the old analysis.

The Military Housing Demolition, Construction, Renovation and Leasing Program revised draft Environmental Impact Statement still targets 220-acre Camp Pinchot along Garnier Bayou as the preferred site for off-base housing at densities of up to six units an acre.

The old and new studies diverge only on the issue of the fate of the site's Camp Pinchot Historic District. It would remain standing, according to the most recent analysis.

The 96th Air Base Wing is firmly behind its new findings, which include an appendix on CD addressing public input provoked by the first study. Substantively, however, the Camp Pinchot proposal's principal critic, the Association for Bayou Conservation Inc., contends the new study is the old study with a facelift.

No construction happens without an EIS that passes muster.

ABC president John Jannazo noted what the group stands for, and against.

"We all agree housing is certainly a priority and it needs to be improved without a doubt, without question," said the former F-15 pilot. "We just don't agree with the location and the quality of (EIS) conclusions. ... There's an overall feeling that the EIS still needs significant improvement."

The group believes Alternative 2, not 6, would best meet the Air Force's needs while minimizing environmental impacts — increased traffic and deteriorating water quality, for example — on surrounding communities. Alternative 2 imagines as many as 1,835 housing units going up on Eglin Air Force Base "inside the fence" and up to 180 homes at Hurlburt Field's Soundside Manor.

Jannazo praised the revised EIS for addressing the issue of building on Air Force land in Valparaiso. But he wondered why it only partially, at best, took into consideration the huge number of people scheduled to move here as part of base realignments announced in 2005. Estimates vary from 12,000 to 20,000 servicemen, contractors and their families. No new sites were added as alternatives, though Jannazo and other observers suspect that many people on their way to Okaloosa County because of realignment will make homes in Crestview.

Jannazo stressed that his group's members, most of whom live near Camp Pinchot, aren't worried about declining property values or a changed view of Garnier Bayou from their homes.

ABC fears stormwater runoff and soil erosion will deal a death blow to the bayou if a military subdivision with as many as 1,320 units goes up.

Although the possibility of a lawsuit to halt construction at Camp Pinchot has been raised in the past, Jannazo steered clear of making threats. ABC has retained a law firm that has provided counsel, but suing the Air Force is only one of several routes still open to the group.

"If Alternative 6 becomes reality, there are still a lot of other options," said Jannazo, of Fort Walton Beach. "The EIS is just step one."

ABC, which has more than 400 members, plans to take part in the public hearing process on the revised EIS. It also continues to talk with Eglin commanders at private venues.

It's tough to gauge how Okaloosa residents not closely involved in the dispute between

