

Air Force gets earful

Angry crowd calls on military to leave 'our national forest in peace'

By MLADEN RUDMAN mladenr@nwfailynews.com

FORT WALTON BEACH — Most of the 250 or so people at the Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base housing privatization public hearing Tuesday night heard bad news: The Air Force still plans to build a military subdivision at Camp Pinchot.

The hearing was punctuated by an occasional outburst or a call from the audience to permit speakers more than their allotted five minutes.

Some of the speakers offered impassioned rebukes of the Air Force's proposal and the revised environmental impact statement that justifies putting as many as 1,320 houses on the 220-acre parcel along Garnier Bayou.

The concern was twofold.

Speakers worried that the Camp Pinchot forest would be largely bulldozed and that the bayou would be further degraded.

Ann Tucker, who represented the Muscogee (Indian) Nation of Florida, said the tribe hasn't voted whether to back the Eglin housing proposal but that she was appalled, personally.

"We do not pass through this land. We are of the land," she said. "Eglin has thousands of acres of land and many alternatives to leave our national forest in peace."

She characterized the Air Force housing privatization initiative as nothing more than a giveaway of public land to private businesses. The new housing for troops would be built and maintained by contractors.

Tucker's remarks drew a standing ovation.

Eglin and Hurlburt airmen and civilians kept quiet because the hearing was not designed as a question-and-answer session.

Public comments about the revised environmental study will be accepted through May 15, but Tuesday's hearing was the only one scheduled before the Air Force makes a final decision about where to build.

That is expected to come in September.

Many of the people at the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium wore light blue T-shirts as supporters of the Association for Bayou Conservation, a local group formed to oppose construction at Camp Pinchot.

No one denied that troops need better housing. The issue was where to build the houses. ABC believes they should go up on Eglin's main base.

Robert Livingston, a Florida State University professor who studies bay ecosystems, dismissed Eglin's revised environmental impact statement as a scientifically valid document. He reviewed it for ABC, and said that no new data was collected and the cumulative impact of building on the bayou was ignored.

"The EIS is seriously flawed," Livingston argued. "There are plenty of places to put your people, but putting them (at Camp Pinchot) is wrong."

Livingston pointed to the deaths of nearly 100 dolphins in recent months as proof that development along shorelines is destroying waterways.

Among the other speakers was Air Force retiree Robb Schmitt, a Camp Pinchot opponent. He was suspicious of the project and wondered if it would be built as promised — to improve airmen's lives.

"It's going to be the same old crummy stuff, just newer," he said.

Daily News Staff Writer Amy Leigh Womack contributed to this report.



NICK TOMECEK | Daily News
Raymond Carter (middle) and his wife, Dawn Carter (right), of the Association for Bayou Conservation show petition forms to T. J. Cheeks and Dominique Fernandez (left) before a public hearing Tuesday evening on Eglin Air Force Base's proposal to build military housing at Camp Pinchot. Some 250 people attended the hearing at Fort Walton Beach Municipal Auditorium.



NICK TOMECEK | Daily News

Camp Pinchot, shown in an aerial photograph, is Eglin Air Force Base's preferred site for military housing. A public hearing on a revised environmental impact statement on the proposal was held Tuesday night at Fort Walton Beach Municipal Auditorium.

