

Eglin housing plan foes get a break

Air Force environmental study goes back to the drawing board to include BRAC developments.

By **MLADEN RUDMAN** Daily News Staff Writer

EGLIN AFB — A study that would have paved the way for a controversial Air Force subdivision on the northwestern shore of Garnier Bayou must be redone, according to a spokesman for the 96th Air Base Wing.

Mike Spaits said the housing privatization environmental impact statement, which was nearly completed, would be updated to factor in the more than 5,500 troops coming to Eglin Air Force Base as part of a Pentagon realignment.

The original environmental impact statement, or EIS, was in the works before the Defense Department announced its Base Realignment and Closure plan.

The Air Force's decision to redo the EIS was applauded by the Association for Bayou Conservation Inc., which argued the original study was badly flawed. It believes building as many as 1,320 homes at Camp Pinchot off Lewis Turner Boulevard or up to 1,925 units north of Shalimar's Longwood subdivision would severely pollute Garnier Bayou.

"I think it's a major positive for the area and I think that it's our good neighbor Eglin Air Force Base making the smart decisions we've come to expect," said association president John Jannazo.

A draft of the new EIS is expected in the spring and its final version should come in the fall. There will be a public review and comment period.

Spaits said the Air Force's decision to redo the study wasn't spurred by the association's opposition to Camp Pinchot and Poquito Bayou as military subdivision sites.

"The document itself has good science and a lot of valid science, so there's no need to redo the whole thing, but we can update," Spaits continued. "We want to include more of the information we know about BRAC."

Compiling the new study means pushing back the housing privatization timeline one year. The Air Force initially imagined it as a 10-year process, with old base housing being demolished and new units constructed in phases.

It's also likely the initiative would be amended to include more housing construction, Eglin officials have said.

The association intends to keep close watch on the fresh EIS process, its president said. The group hopes the base's housing construction "footprint" ends up spread around the county rather than concentrated in the south central region.

"The EIS ... needs to be as thorough and comprehensive as possible," Jannazo said. "We're going to stay engaged and we're going to stay positive."

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