

Articles of Note from *NWF Daily News* thru 20 Nov 05

BRACe yourself!

16 Nov

With more than 14,000 new jobs come challenges

By MLADEN RUDMAN Daily News Staff Writer

A forecast from the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development projects a huge economic boost for the area when Base Realignment and Closure shifting starts.

Along with the good, however, comes the trauma of finding ways to pay for infrastructure improvements to accommodate troops on their way to Eglin Air Force Base.

The study estimated BRAC 2005 would infuse some \$473 million in construction and related spending and about \$474 million annually in payroll and purchasing power when all is said and done.

Realignment also would create 6,437 construction jobs or those generated by construction, while military personnel, Department of Defense civilians and folks supporting them would increase by 7,704.

"These are huge numbers," said economist Rick Harper, a study author. "We expect the (Okaloosa) economy to be about 9 percent bigger and we expect employment to be about 6 percent more."

BRAC realignments must be implemented by 2011 but it's unclear when people would start arriving or at what pace. Harper estimated the total number of people coming, mostly families, would be at least double the number of workers.

"It seems pretty safe to say that it's going to be on the order of between 15,000 to 20,000 residents."

The study's focus excluded costs of providing infrastructure such as roads, schools, sewage treatment and water for troops and workers coming to the Emerald Coast.

Housing availability for area residents-to-be was Harper's principal concern. Though average income for realignees hovers between \$50,000 and \$60,000, he expected they'll encounter trouble finding affordable places to live.

"Housing prices are rising faster than wages," Harper added.

Among troops that will be stationed at Eglin Air Force Base by the beginning of the next decade are 2,187 Army 7th Special Forces Group soldiers from Fort Bragg, N.C. Still others will be airmen and civilians attached to the Initial Joint Strike Fighter Training Program also heading for Eglin.

Crestview councilwoman Linda Parker expects many newcomers to make Okaloosa County home. The big question is how many, and where.

"Everybody is pleased that Eglin made it through BRAC, and now it's, 'Where do we go from here?' " she said. "They will come over periods of time but they won't come a dozen families at a time. They'll come one or two thousand at a time."

She expects many of the BRAC realignees to make Crestview home. The city is taking that into consideration as part of its comprehensive planning.

Expanding a sewage treatment plant is in the works, for example, and there's a plan to build a new one. Laying new roads or widening existing ones will take cooperation at the local, county and state levels.

And paying for it all won't be easy.

"We don't have a (money) tree to pick," Parker said.

She was impressed by the size of the economic boost BRAC is likely to produce, but its costs will be the "kicker."

Parker imagines property taxes and user fees, along with other revenue, will help cover infrastructure costs. But until officials have a better idea of where troops are likely to live, estimating the dollars and cents of infrastructure improvements is tough.

Eglin "is definitely an asset to our area," Parker said. "As far as (realignment being a) detriment, I wouldn't call it that. ... It's here and we need to deal with it. We need to be prepared."

Okaloosa County Economic Development Council Executive Director Larry Sassano welcomed the Haas Center study, which was commissioned by the EDC.

"It's very good news ... when you can highlight economic growth with new jobs and positive impact," he said. "At the same time, it presents us with challenges."

Along with infrastructure, Sassano pointed out, money will have to be found to pay for additional police and fire protection.

Sassano said officials have already been talking about the BRAC realignment. The Haas Center study should help them take the next step.

"I think there have been meetings that have already alluded to these issues," Sassano added. "They know these numbers are much higher than originally thought."

Slowly trickling information about BRAC realignment tests the nerves of local officials. Planning for population growth depends on knowing where it's likely to occur and, at this point, that's the principal mystery.

Okaloosa County Schools Superintendent Don Gaetz, like Crestview Councilwoman Parker, expects north Okaloosa County to draw many realignees.

He also wonders about the southern end of the county.

"No one has been able to inform us about how many school-aged military dependents are coming," he said. "We are actively looking for up to three new school sites in the Crestview area, as well as expanding classrooms at existing schools."

Gaetz also assumes there will be demand for school space in Shalimar because the Air Force has proposed building a large subdivision for military personnel in Poquito Bayou or Camp Pinchot.

At today's prices it takes roughly \$15 million and about two years to erect an elementary school.

Gaetz would like to see some BRAC population settlement, including construction of military housing, happen in Valparaiso because space at schools in the area is more available than elsewhere in the county.

He acknowledged BRAC unknowns hinder preparation but remains firmly convinced Okaloosa County is better off trying to manage an influx of troops than an exodus.

"It's a blessing because our community and economy have benefited substantially from the military presence here," Gaetz said. "Now, not all blessings come easily."

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Judge freezes wetlands permit

20 Nov

, St. Joe Co.'s project, WaterSound North, on hold after federal judge issues injunction.

*By RYAN BURR and VALERIE LOVETT
Florida Freedom Newspapers*

Work on a 1,300-home golf course development in Walton County called WaterSound North is on hold after a court ruling last week froze a federal wetlands permit allowing development on a large chunk of St. Joe Co. land.

In Jacksonville, U.S. District Judge Timothy Corrigan issued a preliminary injunction against the use of a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' general permit for development on 48,150 acres in Bay and Walton counties. The St. Joe Co. owns about 75 percent of the permitted land.

The ruling stops, for now, work on St. Joe-Arvida's WaterSound North project, located near the Walton-Bay county line, said Kevin O'Kane, chief of the north permits section for the Corps' Jacksonville District.

In June 2004, the Corps issued the permit providing front-end permission and guidelines for wetlands destruction during development.

The permit allows development on 30 percent of the area covered and limits wetland destruction to no more than 1,500 acres for the entire parcel.

The Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council sued, saying St. Joe's plans to build commercial and residential developments under the permit violate provisions of the Clean Water Act.

Corrigan agreed.

Under the Clean Water Act, Corrigan wrote, the Corps must issue an individual permit to discharge dredged or fill materials into navigable waters unless the various developments are subject to a general permit and are "similar in nature."

But the permit outlines too wide an array of allowable residential and commercial developments, Corrigan wrote, all falling under the catch-all description of "suburban development" — and not likely similar enough, he said.

The Clean Water Act also allows general permits only if they cause only minimal adverse environmental impacts.

Because the adverse impacts could not be determined prior to the permit's issuance but are assessed during a post-permit process, Corrigan wrote, the preliminary finding is that the permit does not comply with the Clean Water Act.

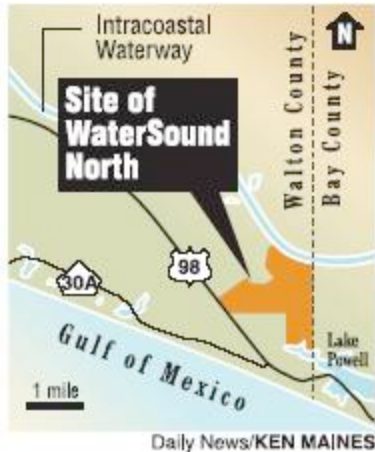
The important message the ruling sends is that the yearslong "closed-door" dealings between St. Joe and the Corps were deemed unacceptable to the public, said Linda Young of the Clean Water Network, a group that also opposed the permit.

"They could've saved themselves a lot of grief by not being so arrogant and thinking they could have their own little private arrangement and to heck with the Clean Water Act," Young said.

The purpose and circumstances surrounding the permit were hardly sinister, according to St. Joe Co. spokesman Jerry Ray.

"The main goal of this was to protect the wetlands first," Ray said. "An individual permit by nature is piecemeal in its approach. If turning back a process that puts the environment first is a victory — I just don't know."

Both sides of the issue were ordered to hold mediation sessions in December prior to a hearing for a permanent injunction scheduled for Feb. 16.



Council will recommend one-month ban on grouper 17 Nov 05

By *ROBBYN BROOKS Daily News Staff Writer*

A one-month ban on all grouper fishing in federal waters could be in place before the beginning of next year, despite heavy opposition voiced by recreational fishermen Wednesday.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, meeting on Okaloosa Island, voted to recommend a total ban on recreational grouper fishing from Feb. 15 to March 15.

The advisory panel also voted to lower the red grouper bag limit to one per person per day.

"They're proposing to limit fish that aren't being overfished," said Donald Brown, a recreational fisherman. "It looks like they're trying to get around what the judge told us to do."

The Fishery Management Council's decision comes just weeks after a federal judge overruled a government-issued closed season for all grouper in November and December, citing federal regulators had overstepped boundaries.

"They ignored thousands of people. This has an economic impact that's incredible," said Dennis O'Hern, executive director of the Fishing Rights Alliance.

O'Hern also said the alliance will explore all legal options and take appropriate action to block the council's recommendation.

The council discussed limiting the fishery ban specifically to red grouper, but that motion did not generate enough support.

"I think you are better off not having a closure as to have a one-month closure with just red grouper," said Dr. Roy Crabtree with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Local fishermen at the meeting disagreed.

Capt. George Eller of the Destin-based Bounty Hunter had hoped the council would postpone its vote until January when more data should be available.

"You can pretty much bet those people don't fish for a living," Eller said of those who supported a total ban.

Some felt the current limitations on grouper fishing had not been in practice long enough to warrant new restrictions for 2006.

"You've given it ten-and-a-half months' time to see if it works," said Capt. Bob Zales, president of the National Association of Charterboat Operators. "You don't know whether it works or not."

Along with the one-month closure, the council voted to implement a new restriction. The captain and crew of a forhire vessel may no longer retain any grouper when under charter.

The restrictions were a surprise for many at Wednesday's meeting, but commercial fisherman Ed Messini said the grouper closure seemed fair.

"It seems like we're being penalized for (recreational fishermen) overfishing," he said to the council during public testimony Wednesday, calling the situation "really frustrating."

O'Hern said the council does favor one side over the other, but it is the commercial industry that usually benefits over the recreational fishermen.

"Once again the commercial voting block carried the day," O'Hern said. "It's been that way since the entire existence of the Gulf Council."

The council will now forward its recommendations to the Secretary of Commerce, who is expected to make a decision on the grouper closure before January.

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SR 123 project delayed 18 Nov 05

Escalating costs will push the project back four years, state transportation officials say.

By **LEE FORST** Daily News Staff Writer

NICEVILLE — Motorists who were backed up more than a half-mile on State Road 85 Thursday evening while waiting to head north on State Road 123 likely will have to suffer it for several more years.

The state Department of Transportation representatives told local officials Thursday that an interchange at the intersection scheduled for construction in 2007 will be moved back until 2011 because of a lack of money.

That didn't sit well with members of the Okaloosa-Walton Transportation Planning Organization, who had delayed the work in 2003 to free up money to widen U.S. Highway 98 in Destin and South Walton County.

"It's just a hard pill to swallow," said Okaloosa County Commissioner Bill Roberts.

Regina Battles, the DOT's district manager for program development, announced the delay when she presented the agency's tentative five-year work program. Escalating costs for right of way and materials have forced the project to be delayed, she said.

Estimates to widen SR 85 from south of General Bond Boulevard to north of Okaloosa Regional Airport, including the interchange, have jumped from \$11.1 million to \$27 million, she said.

A new grade-separated entrance to the airport will also be delayed.

The projected cost in 2011 will be even more — nearly \$37.4 million.

Okaloosa Commissioner Elaine Tucker predicted it will be just as difficult to find enough money six years from now.

"All they've done, in my opinion, is double, if not more, the cost of the project," she said.

The TPO signs off on the DOT's work schedule every year prior to it being presented to the Legislature. This time members agreed to amend the accompanying resolution to say that they would "accept" rather than "endorse" the plan.

They also agreed to write the DOT to ask that it keep the project scheduled for 2007.

The TPO itself delayed the interchange two years ago in a controversial move to make U.S. 98 its top-ranked project. Local officials at that time wanted assurances that the SR 85-123 work would be scheduled as soon as possible.

Tucker said she was disappointed that local officials cannot depend on the DOT to fund needed projects.

"We're accused all the time of shelving stuff and we're not shelving anything," she said.

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