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Local News**Speakers: OLF not just an 'eastern N.C. problem'**

Voices in Queen City oppose Navy site

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'It may be Site C to the Navy, but it's home to others and a treasure to the state.'

John Mackay

president and CEO of Charlotte's Discovery Place

CHARLOTTE— An outlying landing field in the state is “not just an eastern North C problem,” speakers at the Navy’s last scheduled public hearing on the matter said Tuesday night.

The hearing, set up at the request of U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., was held in ballroom at the Charlotte Convention Center. The hearing attracted about 400 people. Dole did not attend. At least one member of her staff was scheduled to be there, according to a Dole spokeswoman.

In a departure from previous public hearings on the subject, many of Tuesday’s speakers were not stakeholders from one of the Navy’s potential OLF sites. But their message was one that has been echoed again and again during the last several weeks — and it was a message of opposition.

“This is not just an eastern North Carolina problem,” said Pamela Strand, a science teacher from the Piedmont.

As each speaker took a turn at the microphone, he or she voiced concerns the Navy heard from Perquimans County to Plymouth and all points in between — worries about pilots, farmers and waterfowl.

“The military spends millions of dollars to train pilots and millions of dollars on jets,” speaker Mike Thomas. “You’d think they’d care more what happens to both of them.”

Some residents spoke against building an OLF at any of the five proposed sites in the state. The Navy considered several as potential places to train military pilots from Fort Belvoir Air Station Oceana in Virginia and Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in Havelock, favoring Site C on the border of rural Washington and Beaufort counties.

“I don’t wish (an OLF) on anybody in northeastern North Carolina,” said Adam Sanborn, who has ties to Perquimans County’s Site A.

"There are a lot of percentages in the draft (environmental study) that aren't certain one percentage that is certain is that 100 percent of my family's land would be gone if an OLF comes to Perquimans County," he said.

That's a feeling that Wanda Stotesbury understands.

Her family's Site C land is at stake. That's why she hauled a mock F/A-18 Super Hornet all the way from Wenona to the Queen City, trailing behind a bus load of her fellow residents. Stotesbury's husband Kenny built the homemade jet four years ago.

"We aren't gonna let them forget where Wenona is," she said.

Time and again, Tuesday's speakers decried the danger of placing an OLF near Pocosin Lakes Wildlife Refuge, which is about four miles from Site C.

"It's the same thing as putting a boiler factory in a hospital," said Charles Bennett, member of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Waterfowl rehabilitator Jennifer Gordon said she "will not stand by helplessly and watch the Navy go forward with a plan for Site C. It's detrimental, she said.

"The majority of the injuries we see are results of conflict with humans," Gordon said. "You know what it's like to leave (a rehabilitation facility) with a healthy bird and then open the car door and it's dead. You can't underestimate the impact of human contact. We see it every day. You won't realize you've done it until it's done."

John Mackay, president and chief executive officer of Charlotte's Discovery Place, urged the Navy to preserve the land near the refuge for the good of the state.

"As an urban dweller, I need these wild places," he said. "It may be Site C to the Navy, but it's home to others and a treasure to the state."

Site C landowner Maurice Manning referred to the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible when he spoke.

"It says there is an appropriate time for everything," Manning told the Navy panel. "You all need to stop trying to pound a square peg into a round hole."

Waiting for the bus Tuesday night — the bus that would return him and fellow travelers to Beaufort County just before 5 a.m. Wednesday — Bath resident Roy Armstrong acknowledged that the messages delivered Tuesday weren't new ones.

"But we have people from all over saying what we've known all along," Armstrong said. "And you just keep saying it and saying it until it takes."



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