

EDC launches campaign to support F-35s

By MONA MOORE

Northwest Florida Daily News 315-4443 | monam@nwfdailynews.com

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The Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County has launched a campaign to ensure that supporters of the Joint Strike Fighter mission are heard. Through a mass e-mail, the EDC has solicited residents to participate in an online poll on U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller's Web site. The poll asks one simple question: Do you support the Air Force's decision to locate the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter at Eglin Air Force Base?

So far, 96 percent of the votes are in support of the mission. The campaign is a part of the EDC's efforts to keep residents informed and involved in bringing the F-35s to Eglin. "It's just another avenue allowing people to say what they really feel," said Kay Rasmussen, the EDC's director of defense and economic initiatives.

The EDC also is circulating a summary of the military's overall economic impact on the county and the need for the Joint Strike Fighter mission.

"The whole idea is just to provide the facts, what the impacts are to our area," Rasmussen said. "The military installations here are our No. 1 economic generator."

EDC chairman Paul Hsu said 73 percent of the county's economic activity is related to military spending. "In Okaloosa, every day should be Air Force Appreciation Day," he said.

The EDC will forward any correspondence its office receives to the city of Valparaiso, Eglin officials and Miller. Residents also can contact officials directly.

Valparaiso city commissioners voted Feb. 18 to sue the Air Force over its plans to bring the F-35s to the base.

To Rasmussen, the opinions of Valparaiso officials are drowning out the rest of the community in the media. "One voice doesn't speak for everybody, but it's really one voice that's being heard," she said. "For the harmony of our communities, I think all of this is hurtful to everybody, no matter how you look at it."

Hsu empathized with Valparaiso's noise concerns. "I don't want it to seem like it's brother against brother," he said. "The noise is a serious concern. I definitely wouldn't want to live with that." Hsu pointed out that the Air Force already has noted Valparaiso's worries in its Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. "I'm afraid the lawsuit will restrict the Air Force's ability to address these concerns," he said. "Why not give them a chance? Just let them work on it."