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Luke's promised land?

High-stakes swap proposals could be the 'silver bullet' to save base

May. 3, 2004 12:00 AM

In the high-stakes push to protect Luke Air Force Base in Glendale from possible closure, no "silver bullet" has been fired.

Not yet.

There's been money to buy up some lands around Luke, but the \$27.3 million that Arizona's congressional delegation has secured from Washington to acquire land is hardly enough.

There have been land-use restrictions, but cities like El Mirage and Surprise built so many homes near Luke's northern departure corridor that it will forever be closed to jets with live ordinance. Requirements for compatible use inside Luke's noise contours and accident potential zones finally are in place.

And this year the Legislature has answered calls for protection with a renewed commitment.

Lawmakers have prohibited the storage of natural gas in underground salt caverns within nine miles of Luke. They also have extended land-use restrictions to include Luke's Auxiliary Field, another essential pilot training facility about 15 miles northwest of the base.

Still to come is a plan to provide about \$3.5 million per year for 20 years to buy land and finance improvements near Luke.

It's a good record. By the time the Legislature adjourns, it could be a *very* good record with a variety of tools in place.

On the horizon is an idea that has the West Valley buzzing. It just might be the insurance policy that Luke's partisans have sought. It's what farmer Leyton Woolf, who grows roses on land inside the noise contours of Luke, calls "a silver bullet."

Woolf and many other landowners have signed option contracts with Olympia Management Group, which has consolidated about 6,000 acres near Luke for a swap with the federal government.

Land exchanges are complex and virtually every piece must fall into place for them to be successful. But the idea certainly has merit, and it was a key recommendation of Gov. Janet Napolitano's military base task force last year.

Olympia isn't the only company seeking to consolidate private property in the noise contours of Luke and its Auxiliary Field. The Luke Preservation Trust, consisting of several home-building companies, also wants to package lands, identify BLM lands for trade and convince Congress to authorize the exchange. It has its eyes on about 2,500 acres.

Both groups are working with Sens. John McCain and Jon Kyl and the rest of Arizona's congressional delegation to build support for the concept. The payoff, as Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs notes, would be huge.

"One of the things that's always been a topic of discussion is why can't we do what Nellis AFB did," says Scruggs. Land trades near Las Vegas - which led to a 2,500-acre safety buffer around Nellis, where bombs, missiles and rockets are loaded and stored - are considered models.

Interestingly, one of the brains behind the trade was Guy Inzalaco, a partner of Olympia with 14 years of experience in land trades, a fact that adds credibility to a similar plan for Luke.

As growth in the Valley moves westward, lands owned by the feds have become more attractive for development. The timing for trades is ripe. The state BLM office is willing to work to make a trade work, but it won't take the lead. Whatever lands are considered must be in the best interest of the public.

Inzalaco has his sights on BLM parcels along Arizona 85, south of Buckeye; near the planned Douglas Ranch, west of the White Tank Mountains; and scattered parcels north of Interstate 10 in the West Valley. The Luke Preservation Trust has its eyes on BLM lands in or next to Goodyear, Buckeye and Peoria.

Under the concept, owners of the private lands around the base would get cash. Olympia, for example, would trade the lands it purchased for federal lands ripe for development. The federal government, were it inclined, could lease the base buffer back to the farmers.

Or, perhaps the state might enter the picture and trade state trust lands now locked inside national monuments - lands the BLM would like for better management of the monuments - for Luke lands.

An exchange likely would secure Luke's future as a training base for F-16 pilots, which has been an elusive goal for years. Development pressures would evaporate. Luke's economic impact of \$1.4 billion per year would be intact.

And private landowners no longer would be in limbo, their property devalued by their proximity to the base and their inability to sell because of limitations on its use.

With this kind of protection and commitment, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission should look favorably on Luke and ensure that it is not among the 25 percent of the nation's military installations targeted for closure or relocation next year.

It's important to keep in mind that land exchanges take time, that due diligence on the lands and appraisals must be done, and state and local government support is a prerequisite.

We believe a land exchange, done right, would be a splendid tool to secure Luke's mission for a long time. It worked at Nellis Air Force Base and it can work at Luke.

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