

OpEd by BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony J. Principi

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Homes in the NAS Oceana Accident Potential Zones exceed Cecil Field by an Estimated 40 times.

The 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission first learned of the effects of encroachment on the military value of the Navy's Oceana, Virginia Master Jet Base on May 17th when the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) testified before the Commission that the Navy had looked at several possible alternative locations for the base but was unable to find a suitable site.

After the Commanding Officer of Naval Air Station (NAS) Oceana briefed the Commission on May 24th on the detrimental effects of encroachment upon the installation, the Commission was compelled to consider if Atlantic Fleet Strike Fighter Wings' operational readiness, as well as the safety of the citizens of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake, were threatened by growing residential and commercial development. Further, the Commission had to consider whether the Navy would be able to continue operating NAS Oceana as a Master Jet Base if the City of Virginia Beach and the State of Virginia did not act on the Navy's often-requested measures to significantly limit and roll back that encroachment.

Both the Navy and the Commission clearly recognized that there was an encroachment problem at Oceana that had to be addressed, and that the Navy did not have a solution. Based on the CNO's comments, the Commission first considered Georgia's Moody Air Force Base as an alternative site. The Commission did not consider Cecil Field until after the Commission's July 22nd public hearing in New Orleans when the Florida delegation offered that facility as a possible alternative to Oceana.

Contrary to some reports, the Commission evaluated Cecil Field's suitability by carefully examining satellite imagery, conducting several extensive base visits and aerial tours, by commissioners and staff, as well as FAA analysis conducted with our staff experts. The Commission was well aware there was, and is, some minor encroachment at Cecil Field.

According to our analysis, there are fewer than 50 homes in Cecil Field's Clear Zones and Accident Potential Zones (APZ-1) (highest risk areas closest to aircraft landing and takeoff paths). Using official Navy population estimates for Virginia Beach as reported in the F/A-18 E/F (Super Hornet) Final Environmental Impact Statement and the 2000 Census Bureau data for Virginia Beach, there are more than 2200 homes in Virginia Beach located within the highest risk areas closest to aircraft landing and takeoff paths, designated Clear Zones and Accident Potential Zones, APZ-1.

In short, NAS Oceana has well over 40 times the level of encroachment as Cecil Field in the highest risk zones. If the Navy's East Coast Master Jet Base remains at NAS Oceana, and Virginia Beach fails to take the strong, proactive measures necessary to cure the negative effects of encroachment, the men and women of Atlantic Fleet Strike Fighter Wings will continue to experience degraded operational training and readiness, and the local civilian population would suffer continued exposure to unnecessary risks.

Ultimately, the Commission could not, and did not, ignore the national security and public safety issues presented by encroachment on the Navy's Master Jet Base. Nor did the Commission hesitate to make a decision when a decision was called for.