

HILL'S FUTURE AT RISK, UTAHNS LEARN

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Hill Air Force Base, Utah's single largest employer, is indeed at risk in the 1995 round of base closures, top military brass told a group of Utahns Monday and Tuesday.

“The bottom line from what we heard is that the threat to Hill is real. There is no doubt we will take hits in the next round. The community must get behind the base to save it,” said Vickie McCall, chairwoman of Hill/DDO '95 Inc. Fourteen members of that nonprofit group of civic leaders who seek to protect Hill and Defense Depot Ogden in the 1995 base closures met with Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill McPeak; John Nowak, deputy Air Force chief of staff for logistics; and Jim Klugh, undersecretary of defense for logistics.

“They made it clear that no one will escape scrutiny in the next round of closures,” McCall said.

Hill is one of five main purchasing and repair centers for the Air Force. The Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission has said it hopes to close at least two of the five air logistics centers in the 1995 round of closures.

That commission took Hill off its closure consideration list this year when its staff said Hill had much higher military value than the other four, mainly because of the nearby Utah Test and Training Range and missile repairs that only Hill performed.

The commission later said it made a mistake and should have kept Hill on its consideration list to allow full and fair comparison between the depots. Also, since that decision, the Air Force has said it is considering closing part of the test range.

Mike Pavich, a retired general who is president of the Hill/DDO group, said it was told, “Hill's strength is still its military value . . . but it's not a guarantee.”

McCall added that the group didn't have to tell the brass about Hill's advantages, “because they already knew them - and told us about them. They were well-prepared to talk to us.”

But McCall said McPeak told the group that continuing budget cuts are forcing him to look at cutting the logistics centers, and he must look at all options including possibly closing Hill.

“He said he only has so many dollars in his budget and must consider the best ways possible to stretch them. He said he will look at everything,” McCall said. “Logistics operations will definitely be smaller in the future.”

Pavich said Klugh said he wants to see more sharing of logistics work between the various arms of the military, and test programs may be offered for that. He said Hill was encouraged to be innovative in that area - and to stretch to find new missions.

“We were encouraged to find ways to lower the cost of maintaining the infrastructure of the base to continue the logistics work it does,” he said.

As part of such efforts, Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, has said he would like to explore the possibilities of attracting new aircraft contractors near the base to possibly share facilities and lower costs.

McCall said leaders told the group that support of a community can also be critical in

decisions about base closure. She said, for example, the community should work to stop encroachment of new development near the base.

McCall said the group set up the visits so it ``can find out what kind of playing field we will have for the next round of base closures and who the players are. We are gathering information we need to plan our strategy."

Hansen praised the group, saying whether bases are closed often ``comes down to political pressure. If you don't believe that, look at what happened . . . to Tooele Army Depot."

He said the day before it was ordered closed, staff at the base closure commission assured him that other bases in Georgia and California would be shut down instead. He blamed pressure from those two other areas for killing Tooele in that last day.

``In this business, you have to be the 500-pound gorilla," he said. ``If Hill closes, it will affect everyone in Utah. It is vital to the economy of the state."