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Military is critical to Santa Rosa County's and Florida's economy

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When you see that Bell Ranger in the air or one of the mentor airplanes in flight you see the future defenders of our nation hard at work learning their art.

For the state of Florida and Santa Rosa County it is part of the glue that holds the community together.

According to the State of Florida the military is one of the top three industries in the state behind agriculture and tourism with an impact of \$27.1-billion statewide.

The impact is also felt very strongly here following a study released by the University of West Florida's Haas Center in January of 2008.

In Northwest Florida the impact is far reaching with \$386.1-million spent on defense in Santa Rosa County and a economic impact of over \$856-million.

That investment also leads to 15,000 jobs according to the Florida Defense FactBook prepared by the Hass Center.

"We are trying to get an update to these numbers," said Pete Gandy who serves as the Military Consultant for TEAM Santa Rosa. "I believe the number will be changing very soon with the new joint strike force plane coming to Okaloosa County as well as the Seventh Special Forces Training facility.

"Both of these groups will make a tremendous impact on not only the number of beds necessary in the area but also the investment to the communities and jobs."

The same study has put the impact of the military to Escambia County at \$5.1-billion and to Okaloosa County to be \$6.6-billion.

That is a lot of dollars and with this impact things like the next BRAC Committee Study could have a tremendous effect to the future of the military here.

BRAC first occurred in 1989, but it wasn't until 1993 it was felt in the area as Pensacola NADEP closed and 3,200 jobs were lost.

In 1995 Whiting Field was a near miss.

"We were just a matter of seconds away from losing Whiting Field," said Don Salter, Santa Rosa County Commissioner. "We have learned a great deal since then and have taken some great steps to protect the bases' mission as well as doing as much as we can to make sure the military's mission is protected."

Capt. Pete Hall, who recently took over NAS Whiting Field, stressed what Santa Rosa County has accomplished and how welcoming the community is.

"I took a poll around the dinner table and this is the favorite post of my family," said Hall, who the informal gather was used to welcome. "This is our favorite spot and we haven't gotten to go to the beach yet.

"Meetings and efforts like this are absolute proof of the wonderful leaders we have in the area who have the foresight which has led to the success we have now."

Hall wouldn't say nothing is guaranteed, but he noted the differences he hears about.

"The more you protect us from encroachment the safer we will be," Hall said. "I feel very safe and welcome when I come out in public here and to speak to groups. That can't be said for leaders at places like Oceana, Miramar, and Key West."

Efforts like the use of Florida Defense Alliance Grants and Defense Infrastructure Grants have played a key role in minimizing encroachment issues as well as the Santa Rosa Joint Land Use Study.

Salter pointed out the Joint Land Use Study has not only become something modeled to other communities but has become the standard to which the military itself suggests to other communities.

One of the biggest things to ensure the future is the creation of the Whiting Field Aviation Park as well as the recent arrival of the T-6 Texas to replace the aging T-34.

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