

TODAY'S STORIES / March 6, 2008

North Charleston and the Air Force mend fences

By Molly Parker , Staff Writer

Once divided by a tiff over development near the base, the city of North Charleston and the Charleston Air Force Base seem to be mending neighborly fences these days.

Tucked into the draft of the decennial update of North Charleston's comprehensive development plan is a proposal that would limit development by placing stricter zoning requirements on strips of land that extend from the base's two runways.

Extending like an "X" from the base in the line of both runways, the invisible strips have been designated by the military as "accident-potential zones."

A decade ago, the Air Force asked for similar zoning restrictions, but North Charleston refused to curb landowners' rights. And much to the chagrin of the military, the city not only allowed but provided incentives for the development of the massive shopping cluster known as Centre Pointe, which falls in the path of one of those zones.

Today, municipal planners hope to let old wars rest as they work to strike a compromise for zoning requirements on several thousand acres of land identified by the Air Force — through a nationwide statistical analysis of crashes near air bases across the country — as having the highest potential for crash sites.

"We don't want to be Civil War re-enactors where we dress up in our uniforms and fire old shots at one another," said Bill Gore, director of North Charleston's Department of Planning and Management.

"This represents our hopes for the future and the development of our community. I think it really is about hope, and not about fear."

As a compromise, North Charleston's proposal also would allow landowners to sell their stymied development rights to landowners in other specifically designated areas of the city targeted for growth potential.

COG is hosting a public input meeting on this topic at 7 p.m. April 8 at the Holiday Inn Charleston Airport and Convention Center at 5264 International Boulevard in North

Charleston. For more information, contact COG staffer Rob Caison at 529-0400 or e-mail robc@bcdco.com.

“Transfer of development rights” programs are uncommon in South Carolina but not entirely unique. Such programs traditionally are used to encourage land conservation by redirecting development to less environmentally or historically sensitive areas.

Bill Dean, chief of the engineering department at the Charleston Air Force Base, said recent discussions with the city of North Charleston signal a renewed partnership between the military and the city.

“I would definitely say that the relationship has changed,” he said. “I think there’s much more interest in the airport in general than there used to be.”

In a 2004 study, the Air Force designated three specific areas extending off the path of the runways as having high potential for accidents: the so-called “clear zone” and two levels of accident-potential zones. In total, this invisible strip stretches 15,000 feet from the foot of the runway and is 3,000 feet wide.

The Air Force created these strips based on an analysis of 838 accidents at air bases between 1968 and 1995 that occurred within 10 miles of a landing strip. At the Charleston Air Force Base, there have been no major accidents with the huge cargo C-17 Globemaster IIIs — measuring 174 feet from nose to tail and with a wingspan almost as wide — that are a common sighting above the Lowcountry horizon.

But a visiting crew on a training mission from Shaw Air Force Base in Columbia did crash an F-16 into the Ashley River in April 2005. The pilots escaped uninjured but the fighter jet erupted in flames.

Read more about accident-potential zones in the March 17 issue of the Charleston Regional Business Journal.