

MILITARY

Potential for hotel near MacDill raises concerns over base's future



Potential development around MacDill Air Force Base has raised concerns about whether the base's fleet of KC-135 refueling tankers might be moved in the next round of base closings. [Times file photo (2001)]

By [Howard Altman](#)

Published Oct. 3, 2016

TAMPA — The prospect of a new hotel near MacDill Air Force Base could leave MacDill vulnerable in any future round of base closings, says the man in charge of the most recent round.

And with the Air Force insisting it has 30 percent more infrastructure than it needs, that's potentially bad news for a community that relies on the billions of dollars MacDill pumps into the local economy.

"The possibility of a hotel raises a red flag that would have to be considered by" the Air Force, as well as by any new Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, said Anthony Principi, chairman of the commission in 2005.

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Principi was reacting to the revelation last week that a \$1.3 million deal for land near MacDill would not fully protect the base from the kind of encroachment that sways the military and the commission.

Gov. Rick Scott and the Florida Cabinet agreed to the deal to prevent residential development on 25.2 acres owned by Florida Rock & Tank Lines at 6604 S Dale Mabry Highway, adjacent to MacDill.

But enthusiasm over that deal soured when state officials learned from MacDill that Florida Rock still could pursue construction of a hotel or motel on nearly 15 acres at the north end of the property, farther from the base but still considered too close to MacDill's airfields. The deal purchases only the rights to use the property, not the property itself.

told Scott and the Cabinet before the Sept. 20 vote.

At the meeting, Linda Shelley, a lobbyist for Florida Rock, said the company was giving up valuable development rights but has not been able to negotiate a suitable price on the hotel and motel rights across the entire property.

The deal approved last week blocks hotels or motels on nearly 11 acres closest to MacDill in what is considered the base's "Clear Zone," an area with the highest potential for a crash.

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Still, development near bases "was one of the most contentious issues we faced," Principi said, speaking of the 2005 base closing and realignment process.

Heavy commercial and residential development nearby nearly led to the closure of the Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach, Va., in 2005, Principi said.

In 2012, a jet crashed into an apartment complex about 3 miles from Oceana, highlighting the dangers of development close to an airbase, Principi said. His firm, the Principi Group, has worked with the Florida Defense Support Task Force on protecting MacDill.

How much of an impact encroachment will have on MacDill's future remains to be seen, said Principi, a former secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The base is otherwise well positioned to weather closure or realignment, but a new hotel or motel could trigger removal of MacDill's 16 refueling tanker jets, as well as eight more due next year.

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Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn said he was surprised to learn that the land deal — part of a \$7.5 million state effort to protect military bases — did not prevent hotel or motel construction across the entire Florida Rock property.

"It would be a concern," said Buckhorn, who was the city's point person during the base closing process in 1991, 1993 and 1995.

So far, no plans have been submitted for hotel or motel construction on the property, and any such effort would require the City Council to change the zoning. That is very unlikely, Buckhorn said, and he would recommend against it.

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"I would absolutely recommend that we do whatever we need to do to protect MacDill Air Force Base within the law," Buckhorn said.

City Council member Harry Cohen, whose district includes MacDill, was not aware of the land deal details but said any concerns raised by base officials would concern him, as well.

"If the base raised issues, I would take that very, very seriously," Cohen said.

U.S. Rep. David Jolly, who sits on the House Appropriations Committee's military construction subcommittee, said any development near MacDill is a concern.

It has a "direct impact on BRAC decisions, as the services must always consider which installations are best prepared for growth and future consolidation of operational assets," Jolly said.

U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor did not respond to requests for comments by deadline.

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something Congress has so far refused to enact. Still, Principi said, a new commission is likely as early as 2019.

Any change in MacDill's status would start with a recommendation by the Air Force to the secretary of defense, who would then make a recommendation to a base realignment and closure commission.

Nearly 90 percent of those recommendations are approved by the commission, Principi said, adding that the commission itself can add bases to the list.

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But even if Congress doesn't approve a new commission, the individual services can make their own cuts. And though MacDill is home to U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command and dozens of other military units, it is also an Air Force base housing 16 KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refueling jets.

No one died in 2012 when a fighter-bomber jet crashed in Virginia Beach. A tanker crash near MacDill could be more dangerous, Principi said.

"These are tankers loaded with fuel," he said. "It was bad enough when an F-18 Super Hornet falls out of sky. What if a tanker had an accident. I'm not trying to be alarmist, but these are issues that a commission would consider."

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This story has been updated to make clear that the U.S. Air Force has 30 percent more infrastructure than it currently needs.

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