

## DAFB project funding cheered (The News Journal)

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### DOVER AIR FORCE

BASE -- The military has slated almost \$522.5 million worth of construction projects for Dover Air Force Base -- a tally that sparked expressions of self-satisfaction from military leaders, the state's congressional delegation and dozens of Kent County movers and shakers.

"This is not just an Air Force base," Col. Steven B. Harrison, commander of the 436th Airlift Wing, told a crowd of about 200 gathered Monday for DAFB's annual construction briefing breakfast. "It's a gem for the Department of Defense, and you're responsible for that."

Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., and Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., agreed that unprecedented community support figured into the flow of construction money into the state -- as well as the base's designation in April as winner of the 2008 Commander-in-Chief's Annual Award for Installation Excellence and the \$1 million prize that came with it.

"That award, I think, is an award for each and every one of you," Castle said, noting that the presidential designation represented the first time that an Air Mobility Command installation had been deemed the best in the Air Force.

Even so, Harrison noted in his presentation, a couple of DAFB's biggest construction projects had run up against funding challenges:

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The base's new aerial port facility, which replaces one that was heavily damaged by a blizzard in February 2003, has been operational since October. But Harrison said the project has been plagued by cost overruns and -- with \$79.5 million already having been spent for the first of three proposed construction phases -- now is being reprogrammed by the Air Force.

The state's congressional delegation originally won an emergency appropriation of \$57.5 million for the entire project in October 2003.

• Military bosses have balked at the projected \$74.2 million cost of a new DAFB facility to house the Armed Forces Medical Examiner, the military's DNA registry and the military's accident investigation team.

As part of the 2005 round of base closings, a nine-member base-closing panel voted to transfer those functions from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in suburban Washington to DAFB, which also houses the 70,000-square-foot Charles Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs -- the military's largest mortuary and the only one in the continental United States.

The transfer of the Reed functions to the mortuary, expanded in 2003 at a cost of \$30 million, ostensibly would speed up the identification of military personnel and civilians who die abroad, but Harrison said the project "is in a little trouble right now. The \$74.2 million bill is about \$30 million more than they want to pay for it."

On the brighter side, a 930-unit, \$196 million housing privatization program -- the subject of rave reviews, Harrison said, from personnel who already have moved into new quarters -- will be completed by December. And the \$53.8 million reconstruction of a 12,000-foot runway, which intersects with the base's second runway, is due for completion in January.

By April, the base's longest-standing priority, a new air traffic control tower to replace one that dates to 1955, will be completed at a cost of \$16.2 million. Castle said the project rose on his priority list after he stopped by for a look and was told that, when it was built, it wasn't tall enough to qualify for an elevator.

"By the time we got to the top," he said, "I knew we needed a new air control tower."

Harrison

listed his top priority for future funding as a \$12 million consolidated communication facility and a \$28 million hangar complex to accommodate the new C-17s and the C-5 Galaxy aircraft that will remain at the base.

However,

Carper was moved by Harrison's notice that the base's dilapidated, obsolete Chapel Center, built in 1956 and listed as the No. 3 priority for future spending, would be torn down even before \$5 million needed to replace it is made available.

"We

need to do something about it," Carper said, noting the chapel's central role in the repatriation of United States residents who arrive at the mortuary after dying abroad.

During

her turn at the podium, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner issued a proclamation in observance of the 60th anniversary of the Air Force Reserve. Col. Randal L. Bright, commander of the 512th Airlift Wing, the Reserve unit at the base, joined the governor at the lectern to receive a copy of the proclamation.

After

the breakfast, dozens of participants boarded buses for tours of the 3,900-acre base. Carper said the tour would reveal why the base, the subject of expansion recommendations after the 2005 base-closing considerations, would fare just as well as the Pentagon considers closings and realignments next time around.

"Why

would we want to close a base that has the kind of facilities, the infrastructure and the resources to do its job?" Carper said.