

Mission Not Yet Accomplished

Luke Clearly Leading, but F-35 Race Hasn't Reached Finish Line

By Bob Barrett,

Like most people in the West Valley, I am thrilled that the Pentagon has designated Luke Air Force Base the preferred second training site for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

But while we may be able to see light at the end of the tunnel, it's important to remember that we're not yet free and clear.

Luke's welfare is critically important to our area. It is a \$2.3 billion, recession-proof economic engine for Peoria and the other communities in the region. Though it is the largest training base in the world for the F-16 fighter, the military is phasing out that aircraft. So landing the F-35 training is critical to safeguarding Luke's future and the West Valley's continued prosperity.

The Arizona Republic has cited a 2008 economic-impact study showing that total payroll connected to Luke is almost \$517 million annually. On top of that, about 70,000 military retirees use the base throughout the year for its medical clinic, pharmacy, commissary, fitness center and gas station. Between November and April, that number jumps to nearly 120,000.

And it's not just a matter of holding onto what we have. Landing the F-35 is expected to benefit the area for decades. In the short term, according to *The Republic*, the F-35 could bring in up to \$125 million in construction money to ready the base for the aircraft.

Will it bring more noise too? Well, Luke has been around since 1941, so most folks in the West Valley are accustomed to the sound of military planes overhead. The F-35's manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, maintains that the jet's sound is comparable to the F-16. According to the company, the F-35 has two key advantages compared with the F-16: It doesn't fly with external tanks, which force use of afterburner more often, and is powered by a Pratt & Whitney F-135 engine, which allows the F-35 to climb more aggressively or use less power.

Peoria has worked hard for many years to secure Luke's future as a training base. We have drafted local, state and federal legislation in support of Luke's mission; obtained the backing of business leaders and other government officials; and worked directly with Defense Department on key initiatives, such as Pentagon Channel and America Supports You, to demonstrate our commitment to the base.

The fact that Luke is officially the top candidate to be the second F-35 training site – the first looks to be Eglin Air Force Base in Florida – is a tribute to the hard work of public officials and business leaders who lobbied hard for the base, as well as the many individuals who stood up and made themselves heard at a series of public hearings in February. I'm proud of the leadership Peoria officials and residents have shown on the issue.

But this is not the time to take our eyes off the ball.

The last hurdle to securing the F-35 training for Luke will be an environmental-impact study of factors including noise, land use and safety. After the draft is released late this year, there will be more public

hearings. Once again, I urge all of you to offer comments to the Air Force in support of Luke as a future home of the F-35.

It's good to be the preferred alternative, but it's important that we continue to push deployment of the F-35 to Luke. We can celebrate next year, when Luke gets final approval for the F-35 training.

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Bob Barrett is mayor of Peoria.