

EDITORIAL

■ *Our opinion/ The community must unite to fight for the Air Force Base.*

Grand Forks base has strategic value

Recent events have increased the danger that the Grand Forks Air Force Base might be closed — but they don't guarantee that it will be closed. There is a chance to save the base, and Grand Forks should take advantage of the opportunity.

A step was taken last week, when a delegation of Grand Forks community leaders met with Air Force officials and the state's congressional delegation. The outcome of those meetings was a heightened concern — and the resolve to fight for the base.

A committee has been organized under the leadership of John Marshall — an appropriate choice, since few civilians in Grand Forks have worked more closely with the Air Force than Marshall, and none has been more enthusiastic about supporting the base. The immediate challenge for Marshall's group will be to gather information and to raise money. Money and facts both will be used to lobby to keep the base.

Committee members know that the best argument is based on the base's strategic importance. It's a good argument. The Grand Forks base has facilities that the U.S. military needs. Missile silos are in place, and the quarters for troops are regarded as better than those at some other bases. The Grand Forks base can accommodate any aircraft assigned to it, and the runway is longer than those at other bases. These are assets that can be important to U.S. strategic interests.

Undeniably, recent treaty developments have jeopardized the Grand Forks base. The Air Force's decision to arm the B-1 bombers with conventional rather than nuclear weapons and to consolidate the planes at fewer bases could mean that the Grand Forks base has only one mission, the missiles, and treaty obligations make it necessary to reduce the total number of missiles. Grand Forks might be closed under such a scenario — but not necessarily.

One factor favoring the Grand Forks base is potential redeployment of the anti-ballistic missile system at Nekoma. Treaty obligations limit the ABM system to a location within 150 kilometers of an intercontinental ballistic missile base — an ICBM base like Grand Forks. If the Grand Forks base were closed, the ABM system could not be reactivated, unless the treaty were reopened.

It's important to the United States to retain the flexibility of redeploying the ABM system — and that is an argument for saving the Grand Forks Air Force Base.

The upshot is that the Grand Forks base might be preserved in order to take advantage of this treaty provision — and it could see other missions added. For example, other aircraft could be stationed here to replace the B-1s that could be moved elsewhere.

Of course, all this is speculation — but that is the nature of strategic thinking. U.S. military readiness depends on considering options and weighing responses. Backers of the Grand Forks base need to engage in this kind of speculation in order to understand how the base can fit in the U.S. military defense system.

At the same time, it's important to remember that the world has changed, and communities need to change with it. Peace has a price. Military spending must be cut, and new treaty obligations must be met.

So at the same time that Grand Forks acts to protect the base, it also needs to consider ways to adjust if the base should be closed. That possibility makes economic development efforts all the more important.

The community of Grand Forks is one of the greatest assets backers of the base have in arguing that the base should remain open. Grand Forks recognizes and supports the strategic mission of the Grand Forks Air Force Base. There is a long history of active community involvement with the base — best demonstrated by Marshall's work over many years.

But arguments in favor of the base aren't limited to the community's self-interest; they reflect the national interest.

Grand Forks needs to understand how the base can fit the national strategic interests, it needs to promote the potential of the base, and it needs to emphasize the community's support of the base.

Mike Jacobs
for the editorial board