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Joint Armed Services Committee

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Cooperation Can Boost Military in Alaska Planning, Unified Voice Key to Keeping Bases, Troops in State

(ANCHORAGE) – Alaska needs a strategic plan to remind U.S. military planners that they can fulfill their global missions more efficiently by maintaining or expanding the military’s presence in the state, members of the Legislature’s Joint Armed Services Committee said Thursday.

“Alaska and the U.S. armed forces have long had a close and mutually beneficial relationship, but we’ve got a continuing obligation to show that keeping bases and personnel in Alaska is still a smart long-term policy for the Pentagon,” said Rep. Eldon Mulder (R-Anchorage), co-chair of the committee. “By working together as Alaskans, we can deliver a clear message that we support our troops and want them to stay.”

Members of the committee, which includes legislators and members of the public, heard presentations from military officers, businessmen and community leaders on military matters, including selective service registration and the Alaska military’s response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. They focused much of their attention, however, on the long-term future of military personnel and facilities in Alaska.

Changes in the world geopolitical situation, combined with evolving military doctrine, drive Pentagon planners to continually evaluate how U.S. troops and bases are deployed around the globe, said Lt. Gen. Norty Schwartz, commander of the Alaskan Command, who directs both Army and Air Force units in Alaska.

Alaska’s strategic location, strong logistical infrastructure and vast training and maneuver areas helped protect the state’s Army and Air Force bases during a mid-1990s round of base closures and realignments, Schwartz said. As the military faces new missions such as counter-terrorism, Alaskans should work to show how it can help the Pentagon meet its new challenges while giving the best return on public investment in the armed forces, he suggested.

Schwartz noted that the anticipated reunification of North and South Korea within the next two decades will likely place Alaska in competition with other facilities as the new base from which the U.S. military can project force into the Pacific region.

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Pat Gamble, who recently retired as a general from the U.S. Air Force's Pacific Command to become president of the Alaska Railroad, said the ability to quickly deliver personnel and equipment from Alaska bases to Europe and Asia – plus historically good relations with the military – would weigh in the state's favor in any future force realignment decisions. The military keeps and expands facilities that help it achieve its missions, but gives less weight to political or economic impacts of its basing decisions, he added.

Community leaders attending the meeting proposed, and committee members embraced, a recommendation that Alaska establish a central clearinghouse of information to advocate for Alaska's ability to help the military fulfill its missions. Such a group could make sure Alaska spoke with one voice in support of a strong military presence in the state, said Mano Frey, head of the AFL-CIO in Alaska and co-chairman of Arctic Power, which has lobbied effectively in support of Arctic oil development.

George Vakalis, a public member of the committee and chair of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce's military affairs committee, said the chamber is already working on developing public information materials making the case for continued military involvement and investment in Alaska. Mulder said such efforts could be the foundation for a comprehensive, statewide communications effort.

"Alaska has a lot of assets that make us an attractive place for the military to operate," said Mulder. "We need to deliver a consistent, unified message to military planners at every level that continued military operations in Alaska serve not just our own interests as Alaskans, but our greater national interests as Americans. I look forward to that helping deliver that message."

Other legislators attending the meeting included Sen. Loren Leman (R-Anchorage), Rep. John Harris (R-Valdez), Rep. Jeannette James (R-North Pole), Sen. Ben Stevens (R-Anchorage), and Sen. Randy Phillips (R-Eagle River).

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