

Craven puts in \$20k for FRC-East lobbyist

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Craven County commissioners are finding the money for a fight to keep Cherry Point air station and the Fleet Readiness Center – East open and operating.

Commissioners allocated \$20,000 from the county's fund balance Monday, and expect to get \$50,000 from a state Department of Commerce grant to help pay for a lobbyist to make sure those who decide know their value the nation, the state and the county.

If it takes more to get the message across, commissioners agreed they may further fund contracts approved with local law firm Ward and Smith, acting for the Craven County Economic Development Commission, and Washington consulting firm Cassidy and Associates.

The consulting contract with Cassidy and Associates puts it on retainer initially for one month at a cost of \$17,500 per month. If needed past one month, commissioners agreed to pay \$12,500 per month through January 2012.

The Monday meeting lasted only about 70 minutes but, even with other business, enough was said in County Manager Harold Blizzard's presentation and subsequent discussion, with Commissioner Scott Dacey most vocal, to get a formal plan.

Dacey is a Washington lobbyist but will not be directly involved or paid for the work on this project.

Blizzard had said that "with the threat of potential realignment possibilities" to the base and FRC-East, "there could be significant effects on Eastern North Carolina, particularly Craven County."

FRC-East is the largest employer in North Carolina east of I-95, employing more than 3,000 civilians. Along with the air station, the base stimulates business and industry in the area with its military employees and the contract jobs produced.

The air station and rework facility had expected the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter to be their next generation of aircraft and aircraft repair, but tight economic times have the government reconsidering everything, including how many of the planes expected to replace older Marine Corps will be bought.

The cost of the F-35 aircraft could reduce the number of squadrons assigned to Cherry Point, which was promised eight squadrons after training squadrons and two operating squadrons are stationed at Beaufort, S.C.

A July memo from Under Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter, under secretary for acquisitions, technology and logistics, said the budget crunch will change how the Department of Defense chooses where F-35 repair work will be done, regardless of whether the depot has been identified.

Carter said all depot repair decisions for the F-35 aircraft must be reviewed to eliminate any repair source duplication without strong justification. He set up a high-level task group to "review all JSF Depot Source of repair decisions, develop cross-service recommendations, and submit the results ... no later than Oct. 30."

Work on other fixed-wing aircraft is also in jeopardy and Carter directed that "all JSF depot maintenance-related expenditures for construction" and facilities to be stopped until the study is complete.

FRC-East expected to receive some of the JSF airframe and engine repair and maintenance work and

understood that would most likely include Marine, Navy and Air Force models.

The plans developed by the consultant with oversight by Ward and Smith are to be consistent with Commerce Department work and additional grants from other sources will be sought.

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