Officials make urgent plea for Cenla residents to speak out

LEESVILLE—In a joint press conference Thursday in Leesville, Representative James Armes (D-Leesville); Leesville Mayor Robert Rose; Vernon Parish Police Jury President Jim Tuck; Fort Polk Progress Chairman Mike Reese; and Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce President Rhonda Plummer made an urgent plea to area residents and other stakeholders to comment on a recent assessment done by the Department of the Army which could result in the loss of more than 5,000 soldiers at Fort Polk. Their call was joined by other Central Louisiana organizations reaching across parish lines.

The press conference was in response to the Department of the Army’s Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) and draft Finding of No Significant Impact for Army force structure reductions and realignments that may occur from Fiscal Years 2013-2020, specifically in reference to the evaluation of the impact of force structure reductions at Fort Polk.

The PEA, where Fort Polk is concerned, contains false and erroneous information.

It is imperative, said Mayor Rose, that the Department of the Army gets the information correct before proceeding with any decision-making. “The stakes are simply too high. It would be tragic if the Department of the Army decides to not only reduce the footprint of Fort Polk but put thousands of people out of work based on information that is flat-out wrong.”
“We have been very fortunate in recent years to have made substantial gains in both on and off-base investments to support Ft Polk,” said Michael Reese, Fort Polk Progress Chairman. “Since 2005, the Army has invested over $1 billion in expansion and facility modernization. Off-base local investments in schools, roads, airports and infrastructure for the direct support of Fort Polk total over $400 million. Our entire region has worked extremely hard to assist the Army in growing and in developing Fort Polk into not only the Army’s premier joint training center, but also to create a quality of life our soldiers deserve.”

“Because of the tremendous investment and hard work that has gone into the modernization and expansion of Fort Polk, it is imperative that we make sure the Army considers the most up to date and accurate data when making these force restructure decisions. I am certain, when accurately assessed, there will be no other base that can match the military value and cost efficient characteristics of Fort Polk,” Reese said.

Much of the physical and economic data concerning Fort Polk and the surrounding communities contained in the PEA is old and thus leaves out year’s worth of infrastructure improvements and investment made by the state and local communities in preparation for growth at Fort Polk.

For example, England Airpark/Alexandria International Airport (AEX) is the Aerial Port of Embarkation (APOE) for Fort Polk and not mentioned in the report. The public/public partnership has provided this service since August of 1993. In total, $191 million, $141 million of which is non-DOD funds, has been spent in this public/public partnership to improve aviation at the Fort Polk APOE.

In addition, the State of Louisiana committed to constructing a four lane highway between Fort Polk and AEX for deployment and training purposes. Twenty years and $143 million later this project is nearing completion, representing a significant State of Louisiana investment in transforming Fort Polk into a combination training and power projection platform. However, the investment was given minimal notice in the report.

Numerous other examples of data left out of the report exist, such as:

- Leesville High School’s $21 million reconstruction and expansion, funded by the positive vote of the people in a tax difficult environment.
- A New South Fort Elementary School to be constructed at a cost of $21 million. The school will be for grades 1–4 and will serve 800-900 students.
- A DOTD Transportation Study at a cost of $650,000 analyzed all state and federal roads parish wide seeking ways to alleviate traffic congestion and promote efficient traffic flow to and from Fort Polk.
There are currently 10 hotels/motels located in close proximity to Fort Polk. Three of these are new hotels opening in 2012. An additional hotel on Entrance Road will be opening this year. There is another hotel planned for the near future.

The four-laning of U.S. Hwy. 171 between Leesville and Many is now complete and connects Lake Charles to Shreveport, providing the only north-south artery in west Louisiana.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has established a Veterans Cemetery that is located on Hwy 467, near Fort Polk. The cemetery is approximately 204 acres in size, with 27.6 acres ready for use over the next 10 years. This cemetery is now open and accepting interments.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has constructed a VA Clinic that is located on Hwy 467, in close proximity to the Veterans Cemetery.

Reconstruction of U.S. Hwy. 171 North and South Bound from Entrance Road to the City of Leesville will begin on March 4, 2013. The amount of this project is $15,131,194.

Vernon Parish will begin construction on a new Sheriff’s Office and Detention Center in 2013 at a total cost of $7.5 million, to be funded by a bond issuance by the Vernon Parish Police Jury.

The Vernon Parish Police Jury through grant and local funding has invested over $34 million dollars into Vernon Parish from 2008 to 2012, through construction projects for new facilities, repairs and renovations, road overlay and road improvement.

The PEA indicates that a total of 6,208 jobs would be lost if a force reduction of 5,300 soldiers is enacted by the Department of the Army.

A troop reduction of 5,300 soldiers would in effect be a population loss of about 13,000 people, when contractors, support personnel and dependents are taken into account. The economy in Vernon Parish alone would take hits to its major contributors, including the education system and public safety systems. The Vernon Parish and Beauregard Parish school systems stand to lose significant funding if the force reduction occurs.

Mayor Rose and the others beseeched area residents and other stakeholders to take advantage of the commenting period on the PEA, which ends Tuesday, Feb. 19 and to urge the Department of the Army to get the information correct, extend the deadline for commenting 30 more days, and refrain from reducing the troops at Fort Polk.

Vernon Parish Police Jury President Jim Tuck said “A troop reduction would have a devastating economic impact to the local community and a significant negative impact on the entire region and the State as a whole. After all, Fort Polk is the largest economic engine of the State of Louisiana and the largest employer of the State of Louisiana.”
Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce President Rhonda Plummer said “We have to take every action possible to keep from losing these troops. The future of our businesses and local governments are at stake.”

Leesville Mayor Robert Rose said “If the Department of the Army proceeds with reducing the number of troops at Fort Polk, then it sets Fort Polk up to become a target yet again for pending federal budget cuts, especially if the federal sequester – a collection of automatic, across-the-board budget cuts enacted into law in 2011 – goes into effect at the end of this month.”

Residents were urged to make phone calls and send letters and emails to the Department of the Army, Governor Bobby Jindal, the congressional delegation, the state delegation and the the Secretary of the Army arguing for the inclusion of correct information in the PEA before any decisions are made; an extension of the commenting deadline; and averting the loss of any troops at Fort Polk.

Sample letters that can be used by area residents and stakeholders are available at Leesville City Hall, the Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce, the Vernon Parish Police Jury and online at leesvillela.gov/ and www.englandairpark.org.

Fort Polk
For more information about Fort Polk, visit http://www.jrtc-polk.army.mil/AboutFortPolk.htm

Department of the Army’s Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA)
To access the Department of the Army’s Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) and draft Finding of No Significant Impact for Army force structure reductions and realignments that may occur from Fiscal Years 2013-2020, visit http://aec.army.mil/usaec/nepa/topics00.html.
Read the documents listed under the Army 2020 section. There is a summary document, while a supporting document goes into greater detail on Fort Polk. The federal register notice also provides a good summary of what is happening.

Attachments:
Sample Comment Letter
Complete list of public comments
List of Addresses recipients for Sample comment letter and public comments
Contact information for Vernon Parish leaders who are available for interview