



(http://buffalo

[BN]

(http://buffalo



(http://



Air Force officer debunks claim that wind turbines endanger Niagara Falls base

TOWN OF NIAGARA - A top officer of the local Air Force Reserve unit said last week that the possible construction of wind turbines in Somerset and Yates will have no impact on operations at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station.

Col. Joseph D. Janik, operations group commander for the 914th Airlift Wing, said by next October, the unit will have new planes whose local flights will take place at far higher altitudes than those of the C-130 transport planes currently based at Niagara Falls.

The eight C-130s are to be replaced, starting next spring, with eight KC-135 tanker planes designed for midair refueling of other aircraft. By Oct. 1, the changeover will be complete, but it seems unlikely there could be any construction on the wind turbines before that date.

Cat Mosley, a spokeswoman for Apex Clean Energy, said the company is still in the stage of working out stipulations, or agreements with interested parties, on the topics to be included in

pre-application studies of the project's impact. Not until those are complete can Apex file an application with the state Department of Public Service specifying the exact locations of the proposed turbines and kicking off a formal review by a state siting board.

At that point, there will be more studies by the Defense Department and the Federal Aviation Administration. But Mosley said a Pentagon clearinghouse reviewed the project in March and found that the project was unlikely to impact the air base.

"We are amazed that misinformation continues to be propagated," Mosley said.

Janik said the local KC-135 training flights will take place at altitudes above 3,000 feet. The Apex wind turbines will have a maximum height of 620 feet.

Asked if he thinks the new planes make the wind turbines a nonissue for the air base, Janik replied, "At this time, with the new mission, yes."

Training flights are not expected to take the tanker planes close to Lake Ontario, Janik said. "Flying the C-130, some of our tactical low-level routes would take us up to that part of the lakeshore, over Lake Ontario, but with the new tanker, we'll be at higher altitudes," he said.

The other unit at the air base, the 107th Air Attack Wing of the New York Air National Guard, is to have a control mission for military drones, but the drones themselves are not expected to be housed at Niagara Falls, Janik said.

The Buffalo News asked Janik to comment on the issue after a pro-air base lobbyist retained by Niagara County told a County Legislature committee Oct. 11 that the Apex project could make the Falls base vulnerable to a future round of base closures.

There have been two rounds of base shutdowns in the past two decades, and in both instances the Niagara Falls base was on the original closure list, but it was kept open through successful lobbying of the Base Closure and Realignment Commission, or BRAC.

Carl J. Calabrese, the former deputy Erie County executive now living in Wheatfield, told the Legislature's Community Safety and Security Committee that the proposed wind turbines - as many as 70, each as tall as 620 feet - could be considered "encroachment" into the Niagara Falls air base's operations and radar areas, although the turbines all would be at least 25 miles away.

In an interview, Calabrese disclosed that his firm, Masiello, Martucci, Calabrese & Associates, also is working on behalf of SOS - Save Ontario Shores - the anti-wind power citizens' group in Somerset and Yates.

SOS has long argued that the Apex project, also known as Lighthouse Wind, would create a wide variety of harmful impacts, from ugliness, noise and vibration to the killing of migrating birds by the spinning spokes of the wind turbines.

The alleged threat to the future of the air base, however, was the main focus of Calabrese's report to the legislators. The air base is the largest employer in Niagara County, with about 2,600 full- and part-time jobs. The county has paid for lobbyists on the base's behalf for nearly 20 years.

Calabrese said because of the lack of encroachment around the base, "Right now the base enjoys a very strong advantage."

But if the wind turbines are erected, he warned, "To lose that encroachment-free zone could be the tipping point that puts this base on the closure list. It's been on the list to be closed twice, so it's not a big stretch that it would be on a third time."

Calabrese said the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority, which owns the Niagara Falls International Airport adjacent to the base, also was concerned about the wind turbines. The NFTA is another client of Calabrese's lobbying firm.

NFTA spokesman C. Douglas Hartmayer said the NFTA contacted the FAA about the matter. He said the FAA replied "that the proposed wind turbine project in Somerset presents no negative impact on the line of sight or navigational aids at the airport."

However, despite the reassurances, some local officials are working on ways to protect the air base from running afoul of the Pentagon before the next closure list comes out at some unspecified future date.

Calabrese said the Town of Wheatfield is looking into the purchase of conservation easements for vacant land near the base, preventing it from being sold for development that might get in the way of takeoffs and landings. Earlier this year, Wheatfield amended its zoning ordinance to incorporate FAA height restrictions on buildings around the base and the airport.

Calabrese warned the Legislature, "It's more expensive than any municipality could afford."

Wheatfield Supervisor Robert B. Cliffe said there has been talk about buying development rights to land around the air bases, too. "We're in the very, very early stages of looking for partners," he said. "It's not a town project. It's a regional project."

Cliffe said he wasn't all that reassured by Janik's statements. "If you have a base that has any negatives, they're hard to overcome in a BRAC," Cliffe said. He said on a visit to the Pentagon, "A three-star general asked me to my face about Brookfield (a proposed residential subdivision on Ward Road)."

Calabrese also said State Sen. Robert G. Ortt, R-North Tonawanda, plans to introduce a bill in Albany in January that would offer military installations more protection from encroachments.

However, Ortt's spokeswoman, Antoinette DelBel, couldn't confirm Calabrese's statement. "There hasn't been a decision made yet. It was just something that was discussed," DelBel said.

email: tprohaska@buffnews.com
