

Air Force confirms consideration of Port San Antonio's bid to build, host new cyber headquarters

The service responded to a bipartisan letter from Sen. John Cornyn and area representatives expressing support for the proposal.

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Brandon Lingle – August 21, 2024



Committee Chairman Rep. Terry Wilson, Rep. Ray Lopez and Rep. Josey Garcia give opening remarks during a hearing Wednesday by the House Committee on Defense and Veterans Affairs at UTSA downtown. Members were expected to get an update on Port San Antonio's pitch for a new Air Forces Cyber headquarters later in the day. Image: Robin Jerstad.

The Air Force is officially reviewing Port San Antonio's \$1 billion pitch to move the service's cybersecurity unit from its current home on Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland to a new campus at the Port.

It's also looking at other opportunities for JBSA under a new initiative focused on a "more strategic approach" to managing its real estate, the Air Force told U.S. Sen. John Cornyn last week in response to his support for the Port's plan.

"The (Air Force) supports the Port's willingness to consider innovative solutions to meet warfighter needs," Ravi Chaudhary, assistant secretary for Energy, Installations and Environment, said Thursday in a letter to Cornyn. "We hope to build on the excellent working relationship with Port San Antonio and other government and industry partners to develop a full understanding of a broad range of opportunities at JBSA."

Since February, the Port has been courting the Defense Department with a first-of-its-kind pitch to build a new headquarters for the 16th Air Force, the service's lead organization for information warfare including intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, cyber operations and electromagnetic warfare.

A conceptual rendering of a 16th Air Force campus being proposed at Port San Antonio. At far left, the existing Boeing Center at Tech Port can be seen. At center right in white is what the Port is now calling Innovation Tower, a new office building it's working to develop. Image: Port San Antonio.

The tech and manufacturing hub's plan calls for developing a new complex via an intergovernmental support agreement, an arrangement commonly used for municipalities to provide more mundane support services on military installations. Such agreements haven't previously been used for major infrastructure investments but the novel



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approach is gaining traction with both state and federal officials because it could yield results more quickly than the traditional military construction process.

Jim Perschbach, Port San Antonio president and CEO, has previously said the approach could get the unit into a new home in about half the time while saving the military about \$1 billion.

Chaudhary said the service is looking for real estate deals “that both significantly reduce (Department of Air Force) installation operating costs and provide greater economic opportunities for a multitude of industry and community partners.”

His letter came in response to a bipartisan group of U.S. legislators topped by Cornyn and including Republican U.S. Rep. Pat Fallon and Democratic Reps. Joaquin Castro and Henry Cuellar, all of whom expressed “strong support” for the Port’s proposal in a June 28 letter.

Port San Antonio Executive Vice President for Governmental Relations Juan Antonio Flores waits to speak during a lengthy hearing Wednesday by the House Committee on Defense and Veterans Affairs at UTSA downtown. Image: Robin Jerstad.

LIGHTNING FAST

“I’m very pleased that the Air Force is on top of this,” Perschbach said Wednesday. “Not just our proposal, but those comments about the strategic real estate optimization and the focus on improving mission readiness, economic development, I think is really nice to see.”

The Pentagon has many aging and decrepit facilities across JBSA and around the world. But despite vast defense budgets, the services face major bureaucratic hurdles on new facilities, a fact that could boost acceptance of the Port’s unique proposal, Perschbach said.

Chaudhary said in his letter that the Air Force’s reviews of its requirements for facilities should be completed within three months.

“That’s lightning fast for any government agency — it took them almost two months just to respond to the letter,” Perschbach said. “So, yeah, we are ready to move as quickly as they are ready to move and suspect that there’ll be a lot of movement within and after those three months.”

One area U.S. representative missing from the signatories on the June 28 letter was Rep. Tony Gonzales. However, he said Wednesday that he’d spoken with Chaudhary about the need for a new 16th Air Force campus in late July.

“As a retired Navy Master Chief and the highest ranked enlisted service member to ever serve in Congress, I remain committed to modernizing the facilities at 16th Air Force,” he said via text. “I will continue to use my position on the Appropriations Committee to deliver for all San Antonio area military bases through military construction and community projects.

He described his recent discussion with Chaudhary as “simple, clear, and direct.”

AIR FORCE REORGANIZATION

“The men and women performing one of the nation’s most important missions deserve an updated work environment and time is of the essence,” Gonzales said. “I do, however, worry the Air Force’s ongoing organization restructure will delay their strategic plan for future installations thus leaving the decision in limbo for years to come.”



Port San Antonio Executive Vice President for Governmental Relations Juan Antonio Flores waits to speak during a lengthy hearing Wednesday by the House Committee on Defense and Veterans Affairs at UTSA downtown. Image: Robin Jerstad.



The 25th Air Force has gone by a number of names since its arrival in San Antonio in 1948. Once called the Air Intelligence Agency, it's part of an operation that has more than 30,000 personnel worldwide. Image: U.S. Air Force.

San Antonio business.

“The 16th Air Force is current housed among multiple aging locations that are past their useful life. Those facilities are geographically dispersed, even within JBSA, adversely impacting mission readiness,” he said, according to prepared testimony. “Anchoring and growing the 16th Air Force at Port San Antonio is a strong and important complement to the broader aerospace and defense modernization work being done at Port San Antonio by companies such as Boeing and their modernization of the FA-18 and B-52 fleets.”

He said that was among reasons he pushed to include \$48 million in the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act for a new cyber operation center at JBSA.

“The time for waiting is over,” he said.

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The Air Force is in the midst of a major reorganization to focus on countering “great powers” like China and Russia rather than the low-intensity conflicts the country has waged since 2001.

The most visible change in the San Antonio area will be the renaming of Air Education and Training Command, a headquarters on JBSA-Randolph, to Airman Development Command.

When the state House Committee on Defense and Veterans' Affairs convened Wednesday in San Antonio, Port officials presented an update on their efforts to move the massive Air Force unit to the Port during a panel on the strength of Texas military bases. It included Juan Antonio Flores, the port's executive vice president for government affairs; Jeff Webster, CEO of the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce; and Juan Ayala, the city's director of military affairs.

Flores discussed the current troubled state of the cyber unit's facilities and the impact the Port's plan could have both on military readiness and