

A new push for F-35 jets at 177th Fighter Wing

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer

South Jersey politicians and businessmen are intensifying efforts to convince the Air Force to base the new F-35 fighter jets at the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard at Atlantic City International Airport.

The 177th's location in the mid-Atlantic is strategically important, as it patrols airspace over major cities from New York to Washington, D.C., supporters of the plan said.

And the facilities are ready to take the latest-generation jets, according to supporters ranging from U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, D-2nd, and state legislators to the Greater Atlantic City Chamber.

"The 177th Fighter Wing has the facilities to maintain and operate 21 fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, including covered parking and a runway of well over 8,000 feet," Van Drew wrote in an Oct. 25 letter to acting Secretary of the Air Force Matthew Donovan.

In the letter, Van Drew asked Donovan to consider the 177th during the strategic basing process for the next National Guard F-35 main operating base.

Supporters see it as a way of ensuring the base's future and creating more opportunities in the region, especially as South Jersey seeks to diversify its economy by focusing on aviation technology.

Last Monday, the state Assembly passed a resolution expressing support for bringing F-35s to New Jersey by a vote of 73-0-1. The bill, sponsored by Assemblymen John Armato and Vince Mazzeo, both D-Atlantic; and by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo, D-Mercer, Middlesex, was unanimously approved by the Senate in December 2018, and now heads to Gov. Phil Murphy's desk for signing.

"The 177th Fighter Wing has the strength, expertise and resources to house the F-35 fighter jets," said Armato. "The facilities have already been designed to accommodate the jets, and the 177th has vast experience in homeland defense and air-to-ground missions."

The F-35 is the latest fifth-generation fighter, made to replace the military's aging fleet of F-16 Fighting Falcons and A-10 Thunderbolt II's, according to the Air Force. They have been the military's primary fighter jets for more than two decades.

The one-seat jets provide greater protection through stealth features and a sensor package that gives the pilot more information than any fighter in history, according to the military.

In late October, the Pentagon announced a \$34 billion contract with Lockheed Martin for the delivery of 478 of the F-35s.

Just a month earlier, in mid-September, the first two of 20 F-35 jets arrived at the Vermont Air National Guard base in South Burlington. It was the first National Guard unit to get the latest fighters, in a 2016 decision.

Dannelly Field Air Guard Station in Alabama and Truax Air Guard Station in Wisconsin were chosen to get the jets in a 2018 decision.

The jets now used by the 177th are 1986 model F-16s.

“We have kids maintaining planes 20 years older than them,” said Col. Brian Cooper, head of the aircraft maintenance squadron at the 177th, during a tour of the facility for Van Drew in August.

Van Drew said there is one technical issue that concerns some about putting the F-35s in Atlantic City: They take longer to prepare for takeoff, and it’s important that the 177th can scramble into the air quickly to respond to threats around New York City and the nation’s capital.

“F-35s can do a lot more and are much more highly computerized, so to — for lack of a better word — warm them up and get off the ground takes longer,” Van Drew said. “The goal and job of our 177th is to monitor and take care of the Washington, D.C., to New York City corridor, so it needs to be fast.”

Van Drew said he is working with 177th Commander Col. Brad Everman on the issue.

DeAngelo called the 177th “a premier Air National Guard facility” and said the addition of the F-35s would “boost its standing as a critical asset in national security missions,” benefiting the entire state.

Other states are also mounting campaigns to get the new jets.

According to a Nov. 26 story in the Detroit Free Press, members of Michigan’s congressional delegation sent a letter to Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett, urging her to select Selfridge Air National Guard Base as one of the next F-35 operational bases, if Wisconsin doesn’t want it.

Earlier this month, Madison, Wisconsin, Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway asked the Pentagon to consider dropping its choice of Truax AGB in Wisconsin for hosting an F-35 squadron.

The mayor stressed concerns about the effects of pollution and noise from the F-35s on Madison’s poorest residents.