

# WHEN ENCROACHMENT IS ENEMY NUMBER 1

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By Barbara Bryant

Mark Kern is a lifelong resident of Belleville, Ill., the largest city in St. Clair County, where he is serving his fourth term as county board chairman. He has watched Scott Air Force Base go from being considered for closure in 1995 to an installation with 13,200 personnel, making it the region's largest employer.

ADC: How important is Scott AFB to St. Clair County? Kern: My father and uncle served in the Air Force, so I grew up understanding how important military installations are to the communities that host them. Scott boosts the local economy by providing jobs and thousands of consumers who support local businesses and contribute in other ways to the community. The base is also a source of well-trained, technically proficient workers who retire from Scott and appreciate the quality of life we offer, decide to stay and pursue second careers here.

ADC: What type of support do you believe Scott AFB needs and values most? Kern: We've done a lot to support Scott: taxpayer dollars have paid for on-base housing, a school, roads leading to the base and a control tower that's staffed by the Air Force. I also negotiated a new joint-use agreement with the Air Force that allows the base to use part of our civilian airport, which was built to relieve congestion at Lambert Airport in St. Louis but also allowed Scott to acquire an additional flying mission. That move was important, because the base's lack of a flying mission was identified as a major deficiency during the 1995 BRAC round. Today, I think the type of support that Scott prizes most—and that I've pressed hard for—is preventing encroachment and we have done that through enactment of a joint land use study. That's why the county spent millions of dollars to buy thousands of acres around the base to control development on that land. This is a controversial move, because that's prime real estate, and the civilian portion of the airport doesn't have the same constraints the military portion does, so it can be hard to explain to developers. But it's one of the most important things we can do to help insulate the base from a future BRAC round.

ADC: What other efforts have you spearheaded to ensure the county feels strongly connected to the base? Kern: The workforce development staff I supervise

participate in DOD's Transition Assistance Program by meeting with exiting airmen to teach them how to connect into our regional and statewide employment network. Our goal is to retain them and help them find training and jobs. In 2014, I also created a new county-appointed department position, the director of military affairs, which is staffed by a retired brigadier general, to serve as a dedicated county liaison to the base. I'm also proud of having formed a committee in 2015 to organize the first annual St. Clair County Armed Forces Ball, which has raised more than \$40,000 over the past three years, which were donated to the three wings on the base for morale, welfare and recreation activities. Some of the funds were also used to offset costs associated with the annual air show last year, which marked Scott's 100th anniversary.



**Kern shares some ideas for protecting and growing a local installation.**

1. Show the economic impact. The communities around Scott know the benefits of having Scott as a neighbor, but Kern wanted to expand support by touting the base's economic impact to the rest of the region. The region originally commissioned an economic study about a decade ago that showed Scott generated \$3 billion each year. That figure has since gone up to \$3.5 billion.

2. Focus on quality of life to attract veterans. St. Clair County is home to more than 20,000 military retirees. Under state law, disabled veterans and surviving spouses of veterans with a service-connected disability of 70 percent or more are exempt from paying property taxes on their primary residences. The county's workforce development staff meet every two weeks with airmen transitioning out of service to discuss civilian job opportunities. And top employers come calling, looking for residents with leadership and technical skills who can serve as executives at Boeing or mechanics to work at the county airport.

3. Forge good relationships with base leaders. Commanders often rotate out every two years, and those coming in have to learn to navigate local government channels. Attend every celebratory event and meeting, and work with civilians on base who have deep historical knowledge needed to get things done.

4. Negotiate and enforce binding landuse agreements. Developers want to build wherever they can, and not everyone in the community understands the need to stop encroachment as a way to preserve the base's mission. Hold high-level meetings with base personnel to discuss these agreements and how else to address potential encroachment issues, especially when preparing to add a new mission.

5. Treat all base supporters as equal partners. "We have tons of volunteers in the community who appreciate being recognized for their contributions," Kern said. "It's important to give every one of them their due." —BB

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