

Jerry Stevenson | ADC 2017 State Leadership Award

Last Modified on 01/02/2020 2:03 pm EST

Planting Seeds to Cultivate Flourishing Partnerships

By Barbara Bryant

Friends describe Jerry Stevenson as quiet, unassuming and self-deprecating, evidenced by his tendency to call himself “an onion farmer”—a reference to the type of farm he grew up on. However, this description does not reveal that he now owns and manages a thriving 130-acre commercial nursery in Davis County, Utah. But those who know him also salute Stevenson as a hard-working state senator, former mayor and long-time advocate for Hill Air Force Base’s military mission and economic development activities, which benefit the Air Force, surrounding communities and entire state.

“Jerry is a servant-leader. He’s understated but effective in fostering military-related business growth at the base,” remarked retired Lt. Gen. Kevin Sullivan, who commanded the Ogden Air Logistics Center at Hill from 2003 to 2007. “I think he saw a bit of himself—how he chose to serve the city of Layton and the state—in the way those in uniform choose to serve their country. He was comfortable with and enjoyed being around military personnel, accepted every award ceremony and dinner event invitation and understood the issues the base was facing. That’s made him very successful in championing projects to ensure the base’s sustainability.”

For his part, Stevenson clearly was impressed by his partners on the base.

“When I started working with the state on the base’s behalf and found myself sitting next to a two-star general, you could have rolled me under the table, I was so surprised. But when you can work with people of that caliber and see the quality of their service and what they do for the country, it’s easy to stay involved, and that’s a big part of what leadership is about,” he explained.

Stevenson’s support for Hill has spanned more than two decades, beginning with his eight-year stint on Layton’s city council, after which he served for 12 years as mayor. During these early stages of his policymaking career, he championed the growth and eventually became president of the Utah Defense Alliance (UDA), which has led the

state's base advocacy and support efforts in the Air Force and at the Pentagon. In the 1990s, the UDA launched a concerted drive to publicize the base's flying and intercontinental ballistic missile support missions, as well as its importance to the state and surrounding communities, to ensure that the base survived early base realignment and closure rounds.



Utah States Sen. Jerry W. Stevenson speaks during the opening ceremony for the newly renovated Utah Aviation Hall of Fame, located at the Hill Aerospace Museum, Oct. 14, 2016.

U.S. Air Force photo by Paul Holcomb

“I was concerned about Layton, which borders the south end of the base because Hill was its biggest employer and feared that if it closed, the city’s economy might not survive during my lifetime,” Stevenson recalled. “So, I joined concerned residents in my and other cities and counties in forming the UDA to serve as the point of the spear in marketing Hill at the state and national levels. Once the base’s mission was secure in the early 2000s, the alliance started to focus on economic initiatives for the base and surrounding community and our efforts grew to cover other bases in the state.”

The UDA has remained highly active, advocating, with support from U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch, to expand the base’s mission, most recently by lobbying for the base to host the first operational wing of the new F-35A Lightning II fighter jets. Eventually, Hill will host three squadrons of the aircraft, which many F-16 pilots will be trained to fly.

The UDA has successfully pursued other defense activity as well, such as the campaign to bring the Utah Data Center, a \$1.5 billion intelligence data storage center run by the National Security Agency, to Camp Williams, a National Guard training site in Bluffdale, about 20 miles south of Salt Lake City.

One of Stevenson’s biggest successes was the key role he played working with Hatch, to

legislate at the state level in 2007 the establishment of Utah's Military Installation Development Authority (MIDA), which supports the establishment of enhanced use leases (EUL) between the military and private firms. These leases allow developers to construct buildings and other infrastructure on underused military land, which are used by the military and private firms to conduct projects that support the base's mission and contribute to the area's economic development. MIDA, whose leaders are executives of cities and counties that surround military bases, is authorized to provide tax increment financing to support such projects and act as an independent third party to hold and manage in-kind payments for the military and developers.

Stevenson conceded that, when MIDA was being formed, some cities were wary of the proposal to set up a development authority with the ability to use future local taxes to fund projects, but staunch support from the governor's office, the state legislature and a constituency that has enormous respect for the military has allowed him to push successfully for passage of additional MIDA legislation each year since 2010.

As co-chairman of MIDA, a role he has held since the organization was formed, Stevenson oversaw the 2008 execution of the largest Department of Defense EUL to date, which paved the way for the development of the 550-acre Falcon Hill National Aerospace Research Park on the west side of Hill AFB. The complex houses the Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center's Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Systems Directorate and the ICBM Prime Integration office, and provides commercial and government office and research space for base contractors and other aerospace industries. The project also involves development of retail businesses, restaurants and two hotels outside the base gate. To support this project, the state has provided grants and issued bonds to construct buildings and highway improvements to improve traffic flow.

The first phase of the project, involving the development of 180 acres, was expected to infuse \$500 million into the state economy. When fully developed and fully occupied, the research park could create more than 15,000 aerospace jobs.

Then-Gov. Jon Huntsman hailed the EUL, saying, "This project will promote our vision of the future for northern Utah as a growth center for the aerospace industry."

Stevenson also plays a strong role in promoting and celebrating Hill AFB in the surrounding community. He works to provide funding for the Aerospace Heritage Foundation of Utah, which gives capital support to the Hill Aerospace Museum, and helps secure state funding for the bi-annual Warriors Over the Wasatch Airshow at Hill, which draws more than 700,000 attendees who learn from the flying demonstrations and static displays "where the Air Force has come from and where it's going" while adding tourist

dollars to the local economy. He also works with various chambers of commerce and other civic organizations that support Hill and spent many years chairing the board of trustees of Weber State University, which has a campus adjoining the base and awards engineering degrees that prepare students to join the base workforce. He has encouraged the public school system to focus on disciplines that are relevant to the aerospace industry as well.

But Hill AFB and the communities around it aren't the only areas in Utah that benefit from Stevenson's public service. In his role as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee he works to ensure funding for the UDA and MIDA and to attract more defense activity across Utah. He secured \$21.5 million in state funding to build an advanced software facility on the base, which will provide jobs for 450 software engineers and computer specialists. Once the facility is completed in 2018, it will be donated to the Air Force, which will use it to support the base's software development and maintenance activities.

He also is involved in the state's current efforts through MIDA to use an EUL to establish a military retreat in the Park City area that would become a year-round resort for military families, featuring a four-star hotel, downhill skiing and mountain biking.

"In this project, we've found ourselves in the unusual position of marketing a ski lift as community infrastructure, a designation that's usually reserved for roads, water, storm sewers or sewer pipes," Stevenson said with a laugh.

"Sen. Stevenson understands from local, state and business standpoints what can be done to enhance Hill Air Force Base's mission and help the state's economy," said Gary Harter, executive director of the Utah Department of Veterans and Military Affairs. "He's an effective leader because he brings many viewpoints to the table. His work with mayors, legislative committees and with leaders on the base equipped him to make the case for Hill's outstanding performance and its benefits to the surrounding communities."
