

# Creating a Community with Staying Power

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## Grand Forks, North Dakota

“When airmen get orders that say they are going to Grand Forks, they don’t want to come here,” Tom Ford, the county government relations officer, admitted with a smile in his voice, “but then they fall in love with the place because the community embraces them.” The proof is that a quarter of the base’s military personnel choose to stay in the area when they leave the service.

Some join the police force. Others, particularly retirees, go to work in the community’s veteran services program. Many veterans join the faculty of the University of North Dakota, particularly its aviation studies program and pilot-training programs. Northland Community & Technical College trains technicians in the service and repair of unmanned aerial systems. There also are opportunities in the private sector. Related industries, notably Northrup Grumman, makers of Global Hawk surveillance aircraft, and General Atomics, with its Reaper and Predator remotely powered aircraft, have been drawn to the Grand Forks area because of its educated workforce and welcoming community, and community-base partnership. The Grand Forks region, which spills over the border into a corner of Minnesota, has a population of 67,000.

When Grand Forks Air Force Base (GFAFB) was threatened with closure during the 2005 round of Defense Base Closure and Realignment, city and county governments, as well as the private sector, combined to save it. At that time, the base’s Cold War defense capabilities, such as missiles, bombers, and aircraft interceptors, were no longer part of the new military strategy. The base was spared from closure, but it became apparent that actions should be taken to streamline operations and make GFAFB a more efficiently run facility. As a result, the base determined it did not require all of its land, so the county leased what had been the Strategic Air Command Alert area in the southwest corner of the base. With technological expertise and contributions from the base, the county developed that 217-acre section into the \$300 million public-private partnership Grand Sky Technology Park, America’s first unmanned flight system aviation park. Military and commercial industries share base runways for training, testing and developing unmanned flight vehicles at GFAFB. The North Dakota Department of Commerce offers tax credits for qualified tenants. The Federal Aviation Administration has designated it the Northern Plains Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Test Site, one of six such sites in the nation that

will help to integrate UAS into the national airspace. Even North Dakota's climate makes a contribution: its four seasons allow testing in extreme heat and cold, as well as high wind conditions.

Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D., co-chair of the Senate Defense Communities Caucus, touted the UAS program as an example of how the military and civilian communities in Grand Forks have brought their partnership efforts to a new level.

“When Grand Forks had the chance to build up its community with greater integration between the military and civilian communities, it not only exceeded its support of previous years, it aimed for the sky – literally. Through an enhanced use lease, Grand Forks County now leases 1.2 million square feet of land from the Air Force and subleases the land to a private developer, facilitating the creation of Grand Sky,” she said. “After three years in the making, this unique public-private partnership has come to life and is helping create seamless opportunities for young entrepreneurs and industry experts alike – a setup The New York Times calls ‘a Silicon Valley for drones, in North Dakota.’”

As impressive as the commercial results may be, it is not the only aspect of the partnership. The military combines with local governments to operate a joint fire department (at a savings of \$4,000 for the base and \$10,000 for the city), shared public parks and recreational facilities from volleyball to golf, and shared health services such as emergency management (including ambulances and emergency management technicians) and mosquito control.

The city of Grand Forks and the surrounding area consider the base to be part of its own culture and economy, which has helped the area to thrive and the base to endure. Col. Rodney D. Lewis, commander of GFAFB, observed, “The level of support that these communities have extended to our wing goes far beyond anything I have experienced in my 25- year career. Our airmen deploy in harm’s way far from home and work long hours in austere conditions. They do so with complete confidence that the families they leave behind have the full support of our local community. The patriotism, trust, support and friendship that exist here are unparalleled and a great source of strength for the airmen and families of this wing.” – KB

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