

Sierra Vista, Ariz. | 2016 ADC's Community Excellence Award

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A Century of Mutual Benefit

“YOU WANT FRIES WITH THAT?”

This monotonous question must have been music to the ears of soldiers at Fort Huachuca in 1975 when they visited the first McDonald's franchise in the nation to feature a drive-through window. It was installed expressly for these customers to allow them to order food while complying with the requirement to remain in their vehicles when they traveled off-post in uniform.

The residents of Sierra Vista, Ariz., enjoy “dining out” on that story because it's an apt illustration of the efforts the city has made to maintain its long and close relationship with the fort, which was built in the late 1800s.

“The folks here have always viewed the fort as an extension of our community,” explained Assistant City Manager Mary Jacobs. “Decades ago, before the need arose for heightened security around military installations, people would routinely go on post to shop at the PX, use the bowling alley and go hiking. The post was part of their day-to-day lives. But we also recognize its huge, beneficial impact — it brings \$2.4 billion in jobs and other economic opportunities to the state.”

In 1972, Sierra Vista annexed the installation, which allowed it to begin focusing in earnest on the types of services it could provide to support the fort, which employs 15,000 people, more than half of whom live in the city and the nearby areas. The city began by taking over maintenance of the fort's traffic lights, and has transitioned to providing library services, collecting trash and recyclables, and providing on- and off-post public transportation, among others partnerships. Cochise College and the University of Arizona South have worked together to design courses to meet soldiers' needs, such as a recently approved major in cybersecurity and management and leadership courses.

Private citizens also have lobbied for the post's preservation, establishing the Fort Huachuca 50 in 1987 to advocate against base closure and for the protection of on-post jobs and missions.

This cooperation includes shared use and maintenance of the fort's airfield. Fort

Huachuca deeded to the city property that provides access from a state highway to a portion of its runway, around which Sierra Vista built its own airport. Since then, the two have worked together to maintain the runway and facilities. The fort runs the air traffic control tower and provides firefighting personnel and relies on the city to provide and maintain a dedicated fire truck and runway sweeper. Sierra Vista used federal grants to obtain this equipment and navigational aids, and to reconstruct and extend the runway.

“This type of cooperation has become routine,” said City Manager Chuck Potucek. “We invest in the airfield as part of our joint planning process.”

When asked to describe the most important example of the civilian community’s support for Fort Huachuca, however, Potucek said that those mentioned above pale in comparison to its extraordinary water conservation efforts, which the fort counts on to meet federal environmental regulations.

Both Sierra Vista and Fort Huachuca value greatly the nearby San Pedro River, which, as a federally protected Riparian Natural Conservation Area, is home to a number of endangered species. To prevent Fort Huachuca’s water use from potentially adversely affecting the river’s water levels, Sierra Vista’s extensive community water conservation efforts and its wastewater treatment plant have reduced local water use and recharged the local aquifer with billions of gallons of reclaimed water.

“The efforts of both Fort Huachuca and the community have helped the installation meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act, and ultimately enabled the fort to receive consistency favorable biological opinions from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife [Service] agency,” explained Potucek.

“Each new commanding general, even for the short amount of time they’re here, quickly realizes, and brags to folks at the Pentagon, that they’ve never seen a more tightly knit community than ours,” Jacobs said. “As far as we’re concerned, the fort isn’t like family. It is family.”

Sierra Vista, Ariz, is the recipient of ADC’s 2016 Community Excellence Award.
