

# Michael Reese | 2016 ADC's Community Leadership Award

Last Modified on 12/06/2019 2:46 pm EST

## Pursuing Progress At Fort Polk

In a previous life, Michael Reese might have been a cat herder. It would help explain his uncanny ability to work so closely with a huge number of people, not only locally, but throughout the state and region and with national leaders to ensure that Fort Polk would be a “station of choice” for military personnel and their families.

Realizing in 2005 that Fort Polk was at risk of closure or downsizing in a future BRAC round and in conjunction with a regional summit focused on the installation, Reese examined how civilian communities supported installations in other parts of the country. He then decided to follow suit by networking, planning and building support in and ultimately well beyond the immediate off-base communities of Vernon Parish and Leesville, La.

“We assessed Fort Polk the way we did other industries and identified it as the state’s biggest employer and the largest single economic impact,” he recalled.

That realization spurred him to approach other stakeholders across the state to discuss the post’s impact and needs, leading to the founding of Fort Polk Progress to create an organized approach to supporting the installation and its personnel. Reese serves as the organization’s chairman.

Through Fort Polk Progress, Reese and his colleagues reached out to the post and the Army at various levels to determine soldiers’ needs and mission requirements, which included improved roads, good schools, dining and recreation options, and spousal employment opportunities to name a few. Understanding that these also were priorities the Army examines when assessing the viability of installations, he began reaching out to communities around the post, chambers of commerce and state and federal legislators to develop strategies and plans to address these logistical and quality of life issues.

Understanding the impact of the installation, the state began increasing the types of investments that would help the region grow and provide better service to Fort Polk. Resulting initiatives included reconstructing or widening of several major state highways to reduce congestion and expanding the number of travel routes, including the widening of Highway 28, the route between Fort Polk and Alexandria, the nearest major

metropolitan area. In addition, the state funded a future growth management project that provided water, sewer and road infrastructure just outside the installation. This project alone has promoted growth in the area, which hosts a university, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs clinic, veterans' cemetery and a new elementary school.

Fort Polk Progress also launched a major education initiative to provide more ambitious academic opportunities for local students and those from military families who live on post and attend area schools. The effort began with an education symposium involving the state board of education, Vernon Parish School District, chambers of commerce and representatives of local businesses. Members of the public, including military families and military leaders also were invited to provide their input.

This led to increased investment in the schools and improvements in academic performance; the school district is among the five top-performing districts in the state. In addition, local voters have voted for a \$21 million bond to renovate and expand Leesville High School. Together with another \$21 million investment in a new elementary school that will serve nearly 900 students, there has now been a significant investment in education facilities. The education initiative earned recognition from the Military Child Education Coalition and attracted the attention of the National Math and Sciences Initiative, which provided the school district with \$1.2 million to allow three schools in Vernon Parish and one in Beauregard Parish that teach military dependents to add advanced "To support the Army family and the Army, you must be prepared to support their imperative to address bigger needs in addition to local installation priorities." placement courses and other training for students over three years.

The community has a long history of supporting Fort Polk, dating back to 1940 when many residents vacated their property for the Army to build the post, and their dedication has never wavered, Reese pointed out. The post, which has the Army's only successful land purchase program, bought 47,000 acres adjoining a military training area after failing to secure additional property in two other states.

"Working together through Fort Polk Progress has allowed us to come to a meeting of the minds and target what needs to be done, then coordinate efforts at the local, state, regional and national levels to get things done," Reese noted. "All mayors, parish presidents, chambers, state and federal elected officials can tell you succinctly what the installation's priorities are and what our communities and state are doing to support the post. Much of our success has been based on the great work that elected leaders throughout the region have done to focus on improving the military value and quality life for Fort Polk."

The key, he said, is communication.

“It takes constant work to cultivate relationships with regional groups and to develop new relationships on post, because the leadership changes so frequently,” he explains. “We also need to rise above and understand the Army’s and the Department of Defense’s military mission and how to support that as well. To support the Army family and the Army, you must be prepared to support their imperative to address bigger needs in addition to local installation priorities.”

Michael Reese is the recipient of the 2016 ADC Community Leadership Award.

---