

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
LEGISLATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH  
ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE  
2024 Final Report**



## **Study Assignment**

The Executive Board of the Legislative Research Council established the Select Committee on Legislative Relationships with Ellsworth Air Force Base to identify and address needs of the base and surrounding communities due to growth related to the placement of the United States Air Force's new B-21 bomber.

## **Summary of Interim**

The committee's first meeting was on August 12 in Rapid City. The committee received presentations on the economic and social impacts of the base's expansion from Elevate Rapid City, the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority, and the City of Box Elder. Topics included regional job growth, infrastructure needs, and education challenges associated with the base's B-21 mission expansion.

In 2023, the total economic impact of the base was \$886.8 million, with an estimated 8,000 new jobs created in the region. The base is the largest employer in the Rapid City area. With the arrival of the B-21 bomber, the total personnel on the base is estimated to grow by thirty percent, and over one billion dollars of construction projects are planned. Box Elder, the city adjacent to the base, is the tenth largest city in South Dakota and the fastest growing city in the state. The city has spent over \$18 million on construction and infrastructure projects, with an additional \$28 million in projects anticipated from 2025 to 2030. While the city has been actively working to facilitate development projects, there are still concerns regarding the availability of affordable housing for incoming personnel and their families.

The committee heard presentations from the Department of Transportation and the Pennington County Highway Superintendent regarding infrastructure projects around Box Elder, including a \$100 million project to reconstruct Exit 63 on Interstate 90. Challenges were articulated regarding the damage to county roads from the weight of material being transported to the base for construction projects.

The committee also heard from representatives of the Douglas, Meade, and Rapid City Area school districts regarding the impacts of base expansion on enrollment in the districts. In the Douglas School District, more than 37% of enrolled students are military-connected. Because there are no schools on the base, most children of military families attend one of the district's six schools. It is anticipated that around 1,500 military-connected students will enroll in the district over the next fifteen years, with most being of elementary age. The district is seeking to build a \$62 million elementary school to address the influx of students affiliated with the base expansion. The district is asking the state to support the project with \$15 million and explained the district's unique position with a limited property tax base and restricted ability to bond compared to other districts. The committee sought more information regarding impact aid that the district receives and a broader perspective on the district's finances.

The committee's second meeting was on October 24 in Sioux Falls. The committee heard similar information about the expansion of the base and the growth that is expected. The commander of the base reviewed the history and background of the base and updated the committee on renovations to the base's runway. The runway will be closed for reconstruction from February to November 2025, with aircraft and personnel being temporarily relocated to Grand Forks, North Dakota.

The committee heard from United States Senators Mike Rounds and John Thune regarding the strategic importance of the base and the importance of the quality of education when the Air Force is making basing decisions. Currently, one hundred B-21 bombers are ordered, but that number may grow. The base could see an additional three squadrons added to the current personnel. The Senators explained the status of congressionally directed spending,

including the provision of \$42 million, that is earmarked for the Douglas School District to help fund the \$62 million elementary school project. They also emphasized the importance of state and local support for projects that improve the quality of life for military families.

The committee's third and final meeting was on November 1. The committee discussed recommendations and noted the valuable information that was presented by Air Force officials and other stakeholders throughout the interim.

### **Listing of Recommendations Adopted by the Committee**

After a thorough review of the mission of Ellsworth Air Force Base and its importance to the State of South Dakota and the United States, as a large employer, economic driver, and leader in national defense, the committee recommends to the Executive Board that the State reaffirm its commitment to the Ellsworth Air Force Base, the servicemembers stationed at the base, and the supporting entities in the surrounding community. The committee also recommended that the State prioritize supporting the military-friendly factors set forth by the Department of Defense and recognized by the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority, including supporting local, state, and federal partnerships to strengthen education, infrastructure, and quality of life issues.

### **Summary of Meeting Dates and Places**

The committee met August 12, 2024, in Rapid City; October 24, 2024, in Sioux Falls; and November 1, 2024, in Pierre and by electronic conference.

### **Listing of Committee Members**

Senator Mike Walsh, Co-Chair; Representative Gary Cammack, Co-Chair; Senators Casey Crabtree, Helene Duhamel, Red Dawn Foster, and Jean Hunhoff; and Representatives Mike Derby, Will Mortenson, Kameron Nelson, and Tyler Torsen.

### **Listing of Staff Members**

Anna Madsen, Assistant Chief for Research; Melanie Dumdei, Assistant Chief for Legal; and Kaitlyn Baucom, Administrative Specialist.

