

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 19, 2008

The Honorable Robert M. Gates  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Gates:

On November 18, we were briefed on the Navy's proposal, as part of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process, to base a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier at Naval Station Mayport. We have enclosed a copy of that briefing. In accordance with the regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, we understand that the Navy's preferred homeporting alternative will be published in the Federal Register November 21 as part of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Following this announcement, the Navy must wait a minimum of 30 days before issuing its Record of Decision (ROD), but may extend that period for as long as necessary before publicly announcing its final decision.

We ask that an opportunity be provided for the next presidential administration to analyze the strategic and fiscal considerations pertaining to this matter and contribute its views prior to the publication of the FEIS and any issuance of the Record of Decision. As Congress has considered issues associated with strategic homeporting for the last four years, it is inconceivable that an additional 90 days could not be given to ensure a proper decision is made.

Based on the briefing we received, we are extremely concerned that the Navy has made no compelling argument to justify its decision. We saw little or no evidence that the Navy's announcement was supported by either economic logic or strategic necessity. Indeed, according to the Navy's own assessment, the meager advantages attributed to Naval Station Mayport over Naval Station Norfolk are "slight" at best, while initial Navy estimates identify nearly \$600 million in military construction costs and other expenses that would be incurred to enable Mayport to serve as a homeport for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. These costs may well approach \$1 billion when the Navy's preliminary estimates are refined and all projected expenses documented more thoroughly. This, Mr. Secretary, does not provide for a persuasive case given the scarcity of the Navy's resources.

Moreover, assuming that mitigation of strategic risk is a viable rationale for expanding nuclear-carrier repair and maintenance facilities, the Navy has not fully examined all alternatives short of establishing a second East Coast nuclear-carrier homeport, including the use of other nuclear-capable repair and maintenance facilities on both the East and West Coasts.

Given the extraordinary financial crisis facing our nation and the compelling need to overcome existing shortfalls and invest in higher-priority Navy budget requirements, the Navy's announcement enters the realm of fiscal irresponsibility. The Navy has identified \$4.6 billion in fiscal year 2009 unfunded budget requirements. Within the last several years, it has already invested more than \$400 million to improve and upgrade its infrastructure at Naval Station Norfolk to support the Navy's carrier fleet with adequate nuclear-capable piers and other support facilities. Before duplicating Norfolk's existing capital-intensive facilities in Mayport, the Navy should make the fiscally sound decision to optimize past investments at Norfolk and preserve scarce resources to address the near crisis in budget shortfalls for its people, shipbuilding program, aircraft procurement, and installations.

Good stewardship of taxpayer dollars demands that the Navy should fund its shortfalls in shore-readiness requirements rather than expand its shore footprint with duplicative facilities. Before creating excess infrastructure and nuclear-warship capacity in Mayport, the Navy should complete a large number of critical unfunded military construction projects. Owing to the Navy's chronic underfunding of modernization at its four public naval shipyards, there remains a \$791 million backlog in sustainment, restoration, and modernization projects at these installations. The nuclear-capable Norfolk Naval Shipyard, which currently has the capacity for repair and maintenance of the Navy's East Coast nuclear carriers, has a backlog for such critical projects of \$224 million alone.

It is not in the taxpayer's interest for the Navy to render such an important and expensive decision at the very end of one presidential administration. The new administration should have the opportunity to assess its defense priorities in order to determine how best to address the defense budget's growing shortfalls. For these reasons, we request that the Navy withhold publication of its Final Environmental Impact Statement. Under no conditions should the Navy issue its Record of Decision before the new administration is able to evaluate the homeporting proposal with greater analytical rigor than the Navy has demonstrated. We respectfully note, Mr. Secretary, that the undersigned have had considerable experience as former Secretaries of the Navy in assessing matters of this nature.

Sincerely,



John Warner  
United States Senator



Jim Webb  
United States Senator

cc:

Chairman and Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Armed Service  
Chairman and Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Secretary of the Navy  
Chief of Naval Operations