

# Transportation Infrastructure: Military Impacts in Okaloosa County

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## DSI Position Paper

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Prepared by



**DEFENSE SUPPORT INITIATIVES COMMITTEE**  
OKALOOSA, SANTA ROSA AND WALTON COUNTIES

February 13, 2026

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**DEFENSE SUPPORT INITIATIVES COMMITTEE**  
OKALOOSA, SANTA ROSA AND WALTON COUNTIES

Cover Photo:  
Highway 98 west side of Hurlburt Field Main Gate



**DEFENSE SUPPORT INITIATIVES COMMITTEE**  
OKALOOSA, SANTA ROSA AND WALTON COUNTIES

Continual operation and expansion of military installations, ranges and their missions is critical to our region's economic foundation and our National security. Transportation infrastructure directly impacts military readiness and mission execution.

The Defense Support Initiatives Committee (DSI) is a select military installation advocacy group sponsored by the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County; DBA One Okaloosa EDC. It is a small group of committed retired or separated military personnel, defense contractors and representatives of the seven Military Affairs Committees from Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton Counties. The mission of the DSI is to support and promote the local military installations and missions, and their positive economic contributions to the tri-county area. As an issues focused advocacy group, the DSI monitors local installation needs and interfaces at the local, state and Federal levels providing information on readiness requirements. The DSI is recognized by the State of Florida as the official representative and lead agency in the Okaloosa County area for military-community initiatives.

### **Okaloosa County Military Installations**

- Eglin Air Force Base
- Hurlburt Field

The 96th Test Wing (96TW) is the host unit at Eglin Air Force Base serving as the landlord for the installation supporting every branch of the U.S. military. The 96th Test Wing falls within the Air Force Materiel Command which handles research, development acquisition, and sustainment of Air Force weapon systems. The largest installation in the Department of the Air Force, with 726 square miles across three counties, the Eglin Test and Training Complex hosts unique test and training sites, major organizations, numerous development programs, operational units, military schools and various Federal agencies. There are 9 Wing/Wing Equivalents, and 35 associate units within the installation's footprint.

The 96TW commander also has operating authority of the largest military test and training range in the continental United States; the Eastern Gulf Test & Training Range. The Eastern Gulf Test and Training Range (EGTTR; aka Eglin Gulf Test & Training Range) connects test and training capabilities across the eastern Gulf of America extending from northwest Florida south to Key West. This multi-service range provides unique capabilities to support simultaneous maritime, air and land training exercises; to include high-speed targets, autonomous drone testing, hypersonic weapons development, supersonic air combat training, and space landings. Due to its tremendous capabilities, the EGTTR is an integral part of DoD's Training Resources Strategy, and is vital for testing the next generation of air armaments, and for training in conditions consistent with those expected in an actual conflict.

Hurlburt Field serves as the headquarters for the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) focusing on conducting global special operations missions. The 1st Special Operations Wing (1 SOW) resides on Hurlburt Field and the Wing commander also serves as the installation commander. The 1 SOW conducts high-stakes global missions ranging from precision strikes to special operations logistics to agile combat support. Special operations forces maintain different levels of readiness to respond to various threats. 1 SOW maintains a *no-notice alert posture* to immediately support crisis response missions; this mission requires personnel to be recalled to base within a short timeframe to generate and launch aircraft.

In addition to AFSOC, Hurlburt Field supports 4 major commands, 4 wings, 77+ aircraft, 24 squadrons, 40+ tenant units, & 24.5K personnel. The installation has executed over 5K combat missions in the last 3 years.

The numerous capabilities found locally support joint operations world-wide—providing multiple unique nationally utilized assets to ensure success in America’s defense.

### **Military Economic Impact**

The military’s economic impact generated in Okaloosa County and the surrounding area is nothing short of monumental. As identified in the 2022 Florida Defense Factbook, northwest Florida installations contribute an annual economic impact exceeding \$22 Billion and generating over 187,000 jobs. Historically, the defense industry in Okaloosa County has provided between 63% - 77% of the county’s economic activity. In 2022, the collective economic impact provided by the military located in Okaloosa County was measured at \$9.2 Billion and supported over 73,000 jobs. The military’s direct defense spending topped \$4.2 Billion—providing the highest economic contribution in Northwest Florida.

Of note, the Northwest Florida defense sector provides 22% of the state’s total defense economy—the largest economic contribution among Florida’s eight regions—including the highest concentration of defense contracting jobs of all eight state regions.

Defense contracting is a secondary economic impact that benefit military communities. Approximately 300 private defense contracting companies surround the military complexes in Okaloosa County with eight of the Nation’s Top 10 defense contractors having a presence in the County. Okaloosa’s contracting value exceeded \$2.1 Billion in 2024—more than double that of the other regional counties combined, and at 81% for the entire Northwest Florida region. Additionally, with nearly 5,000 contract awards, Okaloosa County secured over 50% of all defense contract awards in the region.

According to the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation, in 2024 Okaloosa County ranked #1 in Florida for total defense personnel spending—measured at \$2.2 Billion. That’s wealth generation circulating in the local economy by military families.

As reported by a JobsEQ® and the American Community Survey, in 2022 Okaloosa County had the highest percentage of military veterans in the workforce within the Panhandle; 16,713 veterans accounting for 17.09% of the total workforce. That number has doubled in the last two years according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; in 2024, Okaloosa housed 37,308 veterans.

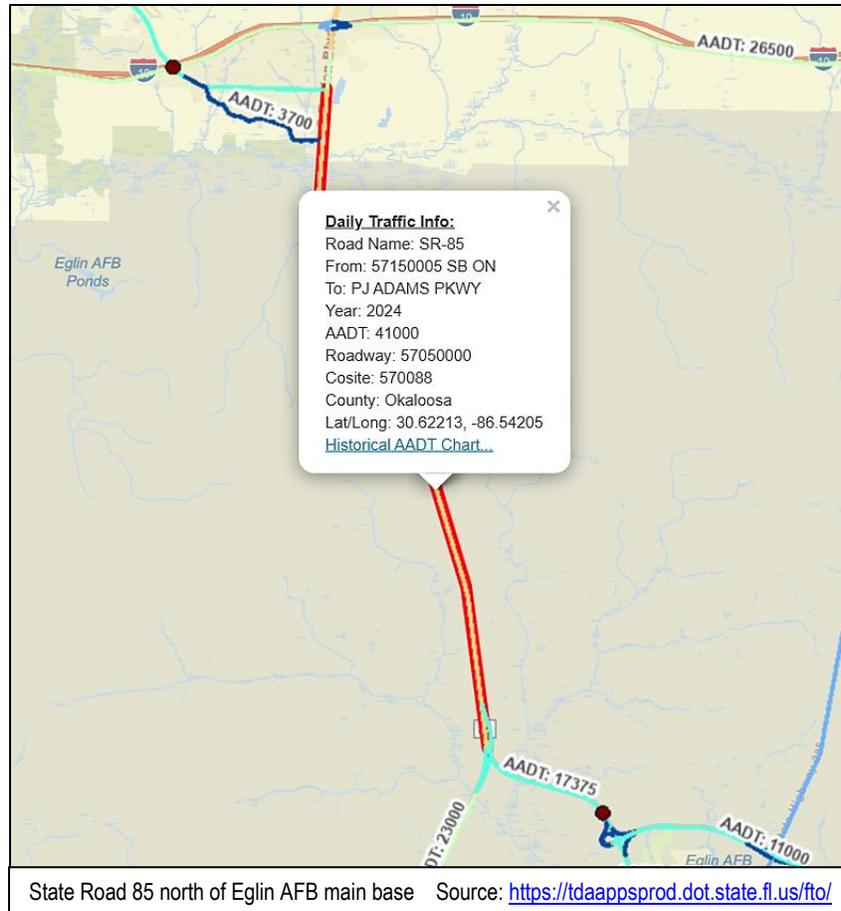
Florida’s Great Northwest commissioned the UWF Haas Center to conduct a regional military talent analysis and in 2025 they identified that over 5,200 military personnel separate from regional installations annually. Of that number, 88.4% separate from Okaloosa County installations—equating to 4,596 personnel. These veteran personnel create a targeted workforce development pipeline. In addition, many of these veterans are entrepreneurs and have collectively contributed to approximately 250 veteran-owned start-up businesses within the county.

### **Traffic Impacts to Military Installations**

- Mission Impact
- Safety Concerns
- Quality of Life

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There are two main transportation thoroughfares that are identified as critical in their capacity impact to Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field; State Road 85 north of Eglin's main base area and Highway 98 west of Hurlburt Field's main gate. In 2024, the Florida Department of Transportation identified the Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) count of Highway 98 and State Road 85 at 46,000 and 41,000 vehicles respectively. In 2025, the Florida DOT and the Emerald Coast Regional Council Transportation Planning Organization identified sections of Highway 98 and State Road 85 as failing in their intended level of service.



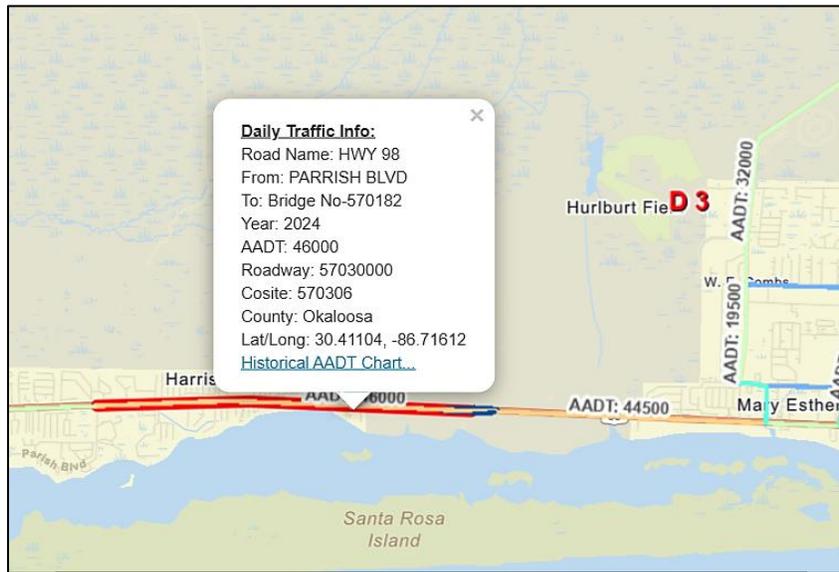
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*Traffic congestion overloading SR 85 during peak hours negatively impacts the ability of personnel to dependably and timely meet mission requirements*

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Both US Highway 98 and SR 85 are components of the Department of Defense's Strategic Highway Network (STRAHNET) identifying a network of highways in the United States that are critical for defense access, continuity, and emergency capabilities. It includes major routes and connectors that link military installations, industrial facilities, and resources supporting peacetime and wartime movement of personnel and equipment.

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Highway 98 west of Hurlburt Field Source: <https://tdaappsprod.dot.state.fl.us/fto/>

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*US 98 traffic backups can create a barrier and delay the 1 SOW's response, ultimately impacting a hostage rescue or other national need resulting in a failed military mission*

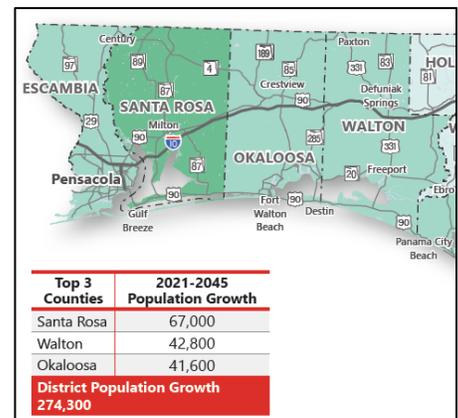
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In addition, both State Road 85 and Highway 98 are identified as part of Florida's Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) which focuses on statewide and interregional significance. The SIS was created to focus the state's resources on critical high-priority facilities that are vital to the state's economy and mobility.

Military mission sets continue to grow in both scope and pace and this growth translates to additional personnel and their families living in surrounding communities. The traffic congestion currently overloading State Road 85 and Highway 98 during peak hours continues to negatively impact the ability of personnel to dependably and timely meet both mission requirements at the installation as well as family responsibilities; such as childcare delivery and pick-up.

With only two major roadways across Okaloosa County, SR 85 and Highway 98 are key to the quality of life and economic health of Eglin AFB, Hurlburt Field and the surrounding communities. These two roads connect people with jobs at both installations to more affordable housing options further from the base and the Gulf Coast. As housing inventory remains extremely low in the immediate area in and around the installations, transportation improvements would provide a more reliable commuting experience from the areas where housing is generally more affordable and where new residential construction is expected.

According to the Bureau of Economic and Business Research, a population increase of 151,400 is expected by 2045 in the tri-county area of Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton Counties. This population increase will greatly impact already congested and failing transportation infrastructure.



## Supportive Measures

A safe and reliable transportation network is critical to executing military missions and to maintaining the strong and vibrant defense economy present in Northwest Florida. Both Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field have a key interest in this area's future roadway development. While the United States Air Force has a deep and integrated history in Northwest Florida, one of the major and long-standing challenges for local installations is the increasing traffic congestion faced by military workforce commuting to and from military bases.

### State Road 85

State Road 85 is the main, and one of only two thoroughfares, traversing north and south through Eglin land reservation in Okaloosa County. There are planned improvements by the Okaloosa-Walton TPO and the Florida Department of Transportation to widen SR 85 to six lanes and to re-surface the existing four lanes. This effort has been organized into several projects that, once complete, would benefit those personnel that commute to and from the north end of Okaloosa County. Personnel commuting to and from Duke Field, Camp Bull Simmons, Eglin Main Base and Hurlburt Field would benefit from the improved roadway.

Included within the planned improvement projects is the elevation of SR 85's Shoal River Bridge, a primary flood zone during inclement weather. Flooding from periods of heavy rainfall frequently occurs at the bridge rendering SR 85 impassable.

Of note, SR 85 also serves as a key hurricane evacuation route. Widening SR 85, improving shoulders and turn lanes, and elevating the Shoal River Bridge would increase safety, reduce accidents and improve evacuee throughput.

**ASK:** Expedite timelines to complete current FDOT plans to enhance SR 85 turn lanes, widen SR 85 to six lanes north of SR 123, and resurface the existing four lanes between SR 123 and I10.

### U.S. Highway 98

Highway 98 is the only south-end road traversing east and west along Florida's panhandle coastline, and is the only road leading to Hurlburt Field's main gate entrance. Hurlburt Field's special operators are mission ready and maintain a no-notice alert posture at all times; similar to a civilian 9-1-1 emergency call dispatch. If they are called to respond, the mission can fail due to a traffic jam.

Florida Department of Transportation currently has plans to widen Hwy 98 from four lanes to six lanes (in 6 phases) from the Alabama-Florida state line east to Hurlburt Field. Work is underway in the furthest west phase in Escambia County with work planned in phases heading east to Hurlburt Field. This plan will provide needed relief to Hurlburt Field in approximately ten years.

**ASK:** Expedite the timeline and reprioritize the current sixth phase in Okaloosa County by Hurlburt Field as the second phase; implement Regional Intelligent Traffic Management to provide a dynamic traffic management system using real-time data to optimize traffic flow and reduce congestion.

### Traffic Impacts to National Security

Population density increases have negatively impacted Hwy 98 traffic trends, generating more frequent and severe accidents, resulting in **unavoidable reporting delays.**

Directly impacts our ability to recall members during crisis response, causing **RISK TO MISSION,** and threatening **MISSION FAILURE.**

### Highway 98 Congestion Relief Package

In addition to the FDOT expansion of Hwy 98 to six lanes, both Okaloosa County and Santa Rosa County are independently evaluating the possibility of new traffic collector roadways north of Highway 98 running east-west to alleviate congestion along US 98—the West 98 Collector Road and the Navarre Community Access Road (Navarre CAR). In addition, the Around the Mound project in Fort Walton Beach could further reduce traffic congestion along US 98.

These parallel corridors will not only enhance daily traffic efficiency but will also provide crucial alternative routes during incidents on US 98. The 2025 Florida Connecting the Collectors Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will assess the feasibility and impacts of a strategic connector linking these two county initiatives. This connection represents a significant opportunity to amplify the benefits of both projects, creating a unified, resilient transportation network that serves the entire region and optimizes the functionality of US 98.



**ASK:** Expedite the completion of required studies and analyses to prevent negative impacts on military mission while mitigating environmental effects.

In conclusion, there is a multi-faceted approach designed to alleviate traffic congestion and to enhance transportation infrastructure for heavily trafficked areas for military and civilians. It includes critical elements to improve traffic flow and reduce safety concerns. The DSI strongly recommends expediting these infrastructure improvement timelines.

The DSI supports establishing and sustaining a transportation framework that benefits both the military bases and the surrounding communities. Fixing these regional transportation issues will take close cooperation amongst local, state and federal agencies.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Garry Haase*  
Garry Haase, Col USAF Ret  
DSI Chairman

*Kay Rasmussen*  
Kay Rasmussen, CEcd  
DSI Manager

Exhibits

# Exhibits

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DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

30 May 2024

Lieutenant General Tony D. Bauernfeind  
Commander, Air Force Special Operations Command  
100 Bartley St  
Hurlburt Field FL 32544

Secretary Jared Perdue, P.E.  
605 Suwannee St  
Tallahassee FL 32399

Dear Secretary Perdue

On behalf of all Air Commandos on Hurlburt Field, we appreciate our partnership with the State of Florida Department of Transportation. We especially appreciate many of your team supporting an ongoing dialogue with respect to our growing concern of local traffic challenges impacting our unique ability to quickly deploy Air Commandos when tasked.

We recently conducted a productive meeting with Secretary Gainer, FDOT District 3, in which we discussed specific aspects of this issue, and we could not ask for a better teammate. For context, a 10-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 98 from State Road 87 in Navarre to Hurlburt Field is plagued by chronic traffic congestion. Over 4,100 Air Commandos reside west of the base, in addition to other Florida residents, and tourists throughout the year. We highlight this fact as the traffic acts as a significant and concerning barrier to our ability to swiftly respond to global crises when our Nation calls.

To limit the impacts to our short-notice military missions, we request your support to enable the timely design and execution of widening U.S. Highway 98 between Hurlburt Field and Navarre. Thank you for your consideration and we are honored to call Northwest Florida the Home of America's Air Commandos.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Bauernfeind", is positioned above the typed name.

TONY D. BAUERNFEIND  
Lieutenant General, USAF

QUIET PROFESSIONALS



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS 96TH TEST WING (AFMC)  
EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE FLORIDA

20 Sept 2023

MEMORANDUM FOR SEE DISTRIBUTION

FROM: 96 TW/CC

SUBJECT: Eglin AFB Support of Transportation Planning Organization's (TPO) SR 85 Projects

The United States Air Force is deeply integrated in Northwest Florida's transportation network and economy. With a test and training range that spans nearly 464,000 acres across three counties that includes multiple state roads and highways, Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) has a key interest in this area's future roadway development.

One of the major and long-standing challenges for Eglin AFB is the increased traffic congestion experienced on a daily basis by our workforce commuting from the north end of Okaloosa County, including the City of Crestview. Eglin AFB's weapons research and development mission continues to grow in both scope and pace and this growth unsurprisingly translates to additional personnel and their families living in this part of Florida. As such, the traffic congestion currently overloading State Road 85 during ever-increasing peak hours continues to negatively impact the ability of our personnel to dependably meet both mission requirements at the installation as well as family responsibilities at home.

The 96th Test Wing is tracking planned investments by the Okaloosa-Walton TPO to widen SR 85 to six lanes and re-surface the existing four lanes. This effort has been organized into several projects that, once complete, would benefit those Eglin AFB personnel that commute to and from the north end of Okaloosa County. These proposed projects include:

- SR 85 from SR 123 to McWhorter Avenue: provide 6 lanes of capacity (TPO ID# A-041)
- SR 85 from McWhorter Avenue to PJ Adams: provide 6 lanes of capacity (TPO ID# A-039)
- SR 85 from PJ Adams to I-10: provide 6 lanes of capacity (TPO ID# A-040)

Included within the TPO's improvement projects is the elevation of SR 85's Shoal River Bridge, a primary flood source during inclement weather. Flooding from periods of heavy rainfall occurs at the bridge frequently, blockading access to Crestview from the South, rendering SR 85 inaccessible.

SR 85 serves as a key hurricane evacuation route, leading traffic directly inland from coastal cities to other major transportation arteries such as Interstate 10. Widening SR 85, improving shoulders and elevating the Shoal River Bridge would increase safety, reduce accidents and streamline evacuee throughput.

*Informed – Connected – Empowered*

As one of only two major state highways that transects our test and training range, SR 85 is key to the quality of life and economic health of Eglin AFB. Specifically, SR 85 connects jobs at Eglin AFB to more affordable housing options in the northern part of Okaloosa County. As housing inventory remains extremely low in the immediate area in and around the installation, improvements to SR 85 would provide a more reliable commuting experience from the northern portion of Okaloosa County where housing is generally more affordable and new residential construction is expected to increase.

Additionally, SR 85 is part of both the Florida Strategic Intermodal System, a network of high-priority transportation facilities for freight movement and the Strategic Highway Network (STRAHNET), a designation given to roads that are critical to the Department of Defense's domestic operations. This designation makes SR 85 key for the emergency and peacetime movement of fuel, ammunition, food, repair parts, armor and other commodities directly supporting military operations.

Improvements to SR 85 are of great interest to Eglin AFB. Civil engineers from the 96th Test Wing frequently coordinate with municipal and regional planners to ensure the projects identified by the TPO are aligned with the long-term plans and needs of Eglin AFB. In addition, the installation's real estate office can assist with any easements and/or rights-of-way on installation property that might be needed to support these state roadway projects. For the reasons outlined herein, SR 85 redevelopment would positively impact the mission and personnel of Eglin AFB.

Sincerely

GERAGHTY,JEFFR  
EY,THOMAS.11549  
83389

Digitally signed by  
GERAGHTY,JEFFREY,THOMAS  
115493389  
Date: 2023.06.21 09:20:20 -0500

JEFFREY T. GERAGHTY  
Brigadier General, USAF  
Commander

DISTRIBUTION: (listed on next page)



**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
1ST SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING (AFSOC)  
HURLBURT FIELD FLORIDA**

05 February 2026

Colonel Mark L. Hamilton, USAF  
Commander  
1st Special Operations Wing  
212 Lukasik Avenue Suite 315  
Hurlburt Field FL 32544

City Manager Jason Davis  
107 Miracle Strip Parkway SW  
Fort Walton Beach FL 32548

Dear Mr. Davis,

Please accept this Commander's endorsement for Fort Walton Beach City's project Around the Mound that improves traffic and safety from Okaloosa Island to the City of Fort Walton Beach. The 1st Special Operations Wing (1 SOW) view this project as the second most important project that Okaloosa County is pursuing to improve traffic congestion along Highway 98, right behind widening Highway 98 to six lanes from Cody Avenue to Santa Rosa County line.

Hurlburt Field is home to the 1 SOW, one of five Air Force active-duty special operations wings and falls under the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). The 1 SOW is a pivotal component of AFSOC's ability to provide airpower to conduct special operations missions worldwide. The primary mission of the 1 SOW is to rapidly deploy and execute specialized and contingency operations in support of national priorities. The wing's core missions include close air support, precision aerospace firepower, specialized aerospace mobility, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations, and agile combat support. 1 SOW is aggressively pursuing all avenues to ensure that service members can meet these requirements.

The new Around the Mound Project is a critical mission multiplier that will greatly enhance 1 SOW's mission readiness, quality of life, and improve economic vitality in the shared community. 1 SOW is imploring all government officials, local and federal, to act to increase capacity, increase safety, and fund all traffic improvement projects along the Highway 98 corridor from Okaloosa to Santa Rosa County.

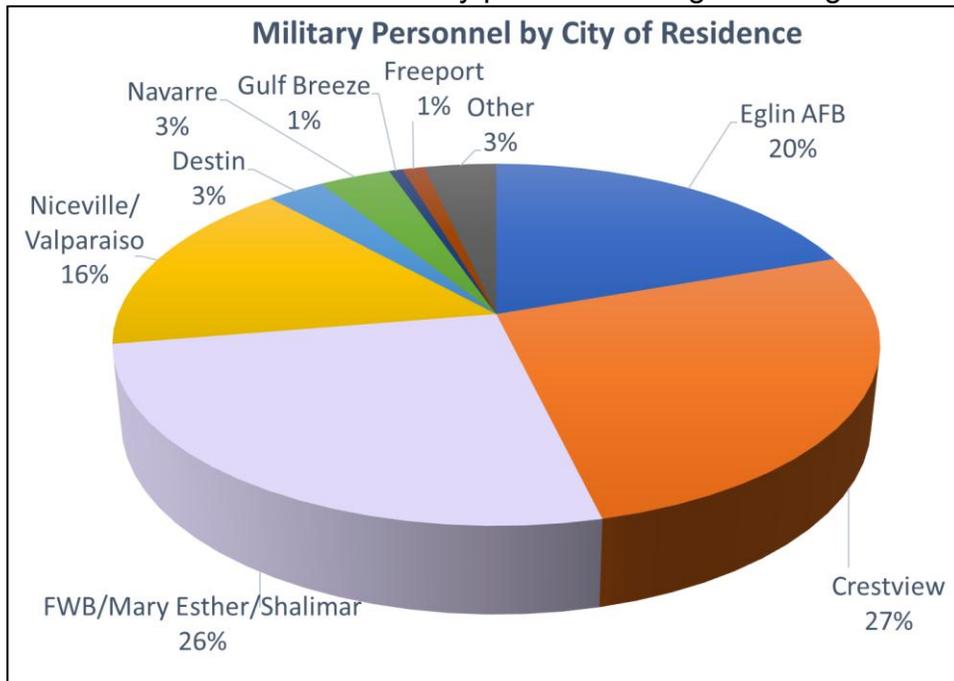
Should you or your staff members have questions, please contact Mr. Scott Davidson, [scott.davidson.8@us.af.mil](mailto:scott.davidson.8@us.af.mil), 1 SOCES/CENP, (850) 884-3798.

Sincerely,

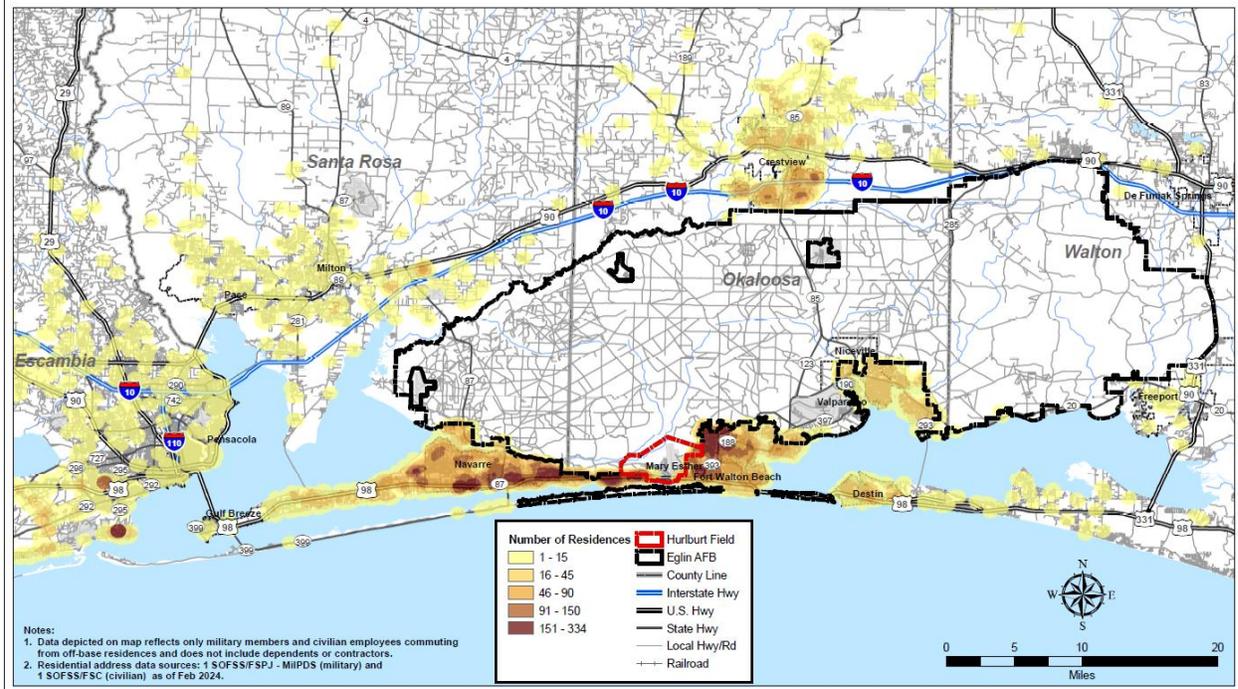
MARK L. HAMILTON, Colonel, USAF  
Commander

*Any Time...Any Place*

Residential locations for military personnel assigned to Eglin AFB



### HURLBURT FIELD OFF-BASE COMMUTER LOCATIONS



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