

LOCAL NEWS

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L.B. lobbying hard for Naval Shipyard

Expected on hit list again in '95

By James R. Carroll
From Our National Bureau

WASHINGTON — It was a very near thing last year.

Last June 25 the Long Beach Naval Shipyard squeaked

through the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission on a 4-3 vote, escaping shutdown for the second time in two years.

"Long Beach was in jeopardy

in 1991, it was in jeopardy in '93, and it will be in jeopardy in '95," commission member Peter Bowman said at the time.

That was all the supporters of one of the city's largest employers needed to hear. The backers of the Long Beach yard have started earlier than ever in a

campaign to win friends and influence people in high places months before any votes are taken.

Hardly a week has passed since that day without city officials, shipyard employees or members of Congress meeting somewhere with somebody to dis-

cuss the shipyard's future.

"We won't leave a stone unturned," said Rep. Stephen Horn, R-Long Beach, who has been one of the shipyard's big boosters and formed a coalition with 15 other Southern Califor-

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SHIPYARD: Long Beach lobbies hard to keep Navy facility open

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nia House members whose aim is to keep the yard open.

Although President Bill Clinton is not expected to appoint the new members of the independent base closing panel until January, proponents of the Long Beach shipyard realized that now isn't too soon to begin honing their case.

For the shipyard, the real decision-making process begins in the bureaucratic maze of the U.S. Navy.

And that is where Long Beach has set up its first line of defense, with the lieutenants and captains charged with gathering numbers and refining research on every Navy facility.

The second front is in the offices of higher-level Navy officials, who review what their subordinates have done and select possible candidates for closing, with a final hit list due early next year.

"At this point, we are educating the people who have to sign off and are working hand in hand with the people who are

making the arguments," said Larry Taub, a Washington lobbyist under special contract with the city of Long Beach just to handle the shipyard.

E. Del Smith, the city's chief Washington lobbyist, also represents the Long Beach Naval Shipyard Employees Association and Los Angeles County and has been working the staff of the commission and Capitol Hill.

The city has not been reluctant to talk with the base closing commission. Last February, a delegation led by outgoing Long Beach Mayor Ernie Kell came to Washington to talk with the commission staff.

They made the visit because even though it has no members, the commission's staff already is conducting preliminary research.

The officials also met with Navy Secretary John Dalton and Navy Undersecretary Richard Danzig, one of Dalton's point men on base closures.

Later that same month, Dalton came to Long Beach for a ship commissioning. Horn made sure the secretary got a personal

tour of the shipyard before he left town.

Shipyard supporters have also huddled with White House officials.

Although the White House staff has been directed not to act as caseworkers on base closings, the president's people — and Clinton himself — are expected to have some input on the final shape of the 1995 base closings list that the Pentagon will submit to the commission for its consideration.

In March, J.B. Larkins, president of the shipyard's employee association, joined other union leaders in a session with Dorothy Robyn, special assistant to Clinton for defense conversion.

A month later, Larkins was back for a conference with more White House officials, including Clinton's eyes and ears on politics in California, Thomas Epstein.

It was in that meeting that lobbyist Smith's "people approach" strategy was given its first test.

Smith and Long Beach's offi-

cial had been told by the base closings panel staff that the shipyard's unique dry-dock facilities and its overall military value were not going to be persuasive in saving the facility in 1995.

So Smith decided to emphasize the employees themselves, and the political ramifications of a closure.

"We said that to lay off 3,300 employees (or about 2,500 after the upcoming August layoffs) is wholly unwise in a state that has not yet recovered economically, in a state the president is worrying daily about in terms of the level of its economic recovery," Smith said. And, not incidentally, in a state Clinton needs to help him win re-election in 1996.

Taub and some members of the area's House delegation have spent more time with the Navy and Defense Department officials.

Shipyard proponents are hoping to set up a key meeting with Defense Secretary William J. Perry, who will send the Pentagon's base closing proposals to the commission next year.

In the meantime, Long Beach

contingents have been touching base with just about every Navy and Defense Department official under Perry who will touch the list.

Whether all of this intensive work will pay off for Long Beach remains to be seen.

Smith takes heart in the fact that in the previous base closing rounds, neither the Navy nor the Defense Department has recommended shutting Long Beach. Each time, it has been the commission's idea, and each time the panel ultimately rejected it, but by closer and closer margins.

Larkins is convinced that somebody will put Long Beach on the hit list again, but he wants to be satisfied that every bureaucrat, military officer and civilian appointee connected with the base closings process knows the shipyard's story.

Based on the schedule of the previous rounds, the base closings commission will be concluding its hearings this time next year, and on a day late in June it will deliver its verdict on the survival of the Long Beach Naval Shipyard.