

LONG BEACH

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Clinton may move base closings to '97

L.B. yard supporters fight postponement

From staff and wire reports

The Clinton administration is considering delaying some military base closure decisions until after the 1996 presidential election.

A senior Pentagon official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a 1997 base closure round could be added, softening the impact of next year's scheduled round. Deputy Defense Secretary John Deutch confirmed Tuesday that the idea "remains under study" at the Pentagon.

Long Beach Naval Shipyard supporters, fighting hard to keep the federal base closure commission from shutting the yard in 1995, say any delay is a bad idea.

"Everyone is negative about any kind of postponement. It's not fair to the communities that are braced for the next round of closings," said Bill Gurzi, Save Our Shipyard committee chairman.

Rep. Dave McCurdy, D-Okla.,

chairman of a House Armed Services subcommittee overseeing base closings, said Pentagon officials have privately discussed the proposal with lawmakers.

"On the political level, it probably would be very popular to delay," McCurdy said. "Any time we can delay pain, whether it's going to the dentist or cutting the budget, we will do that."

The military, hoping to free funds for new weapons programs, opposes any delay in base closings and is arguing within the administration against the proposal.

If President Bill Clinton decides to seek an additional round in 1997, he will need congressional approval. A key factor driving the administration is the expectation that next year's closure list would deliver a major blow to the nation's bases and the communities that depend on them.

Based on Pentagon estimates, the 1995 base closings, coming a year before Clinton is up for re-

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election, could equal the combined effect of base closure rounds in 1988, 1991 and 1993. Those resulted in orders to close 103 major bases.

The senior Pentagon official described an atmosphere of apprehension in military communities awaiting the Pentagon recommendations early next year. Those recommendations go before the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission for review; then a revised list goes to Congress and the president for final approval.

"The worst of it is the effect it has on the workers and their families," Gurzi said.

He said the communities facing base closure should not be made to wait two more years, or have to go through two more base-closure rounds, because of the great costs associated with fighting to keep a base open.

Rep. James Hansen, R-Utah, said Clinton would be committing political suicide to cut bases and slash military jobs across the country before his 1996 re-election bid. Hansen takes the question a step further with his bill to put off the 1995 round entirely until 1997. He has 30 co-sponsors for his bill.

Rep. Stephen Horn, R-Long Beach, said he favors Hansen's proposal. Horn said he wants to postpone the closings in order to allow the economy to absorb the military cuts that have already

taken place.

Base closings ordered to date will eventually eliminate about 150,000 military and civilian positions, according to the most recent Pentagon estimate.

The debate going on within the Clinton administration pits these political and economic concerns against the firmly stated views of military leaders: They want to go ahead with base closures so they can afford to modernize their forces.

Adm. Jeremy Boorda, chief of naval operations, said Tuesday that he wants base closures to proceed fairly "and, hopefully, quickly ... We have a fixed income, and we know what it is, and we can't afford to pay for things we don't need."

One strong argument in favor of reducing the size of the 1995 base closure round, McCurdy said, is the high cost of closing bases and the slow progress to date in shutting down bases ordered closed in previous rounds.