

Enid News & Eagle

Company Will Match Cost Savings on Vance Simulator Instructors

By Jeff Mullin, Senior Writer

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ENID — The company that employs simulator instructors at Vance Air Force Base has offered, in writing, to match cost savings the Air Force projects it would realize through converting those jobs from contract to government service.

Kevin M. Denny, vice president for contracts with URS Federal Support Services Inc., said he was sending a letter Tuesday to Air Education and Training Command officials stating, “We will match cost savings that the government reasonably expects to reap through in-sourcing.”

Lear Siegler Services, a division of URS that employs some 400 simulator instructors throughout AETC, was informed in December the company’s three-year contract, which expires at midnight Sept. 30, would not be renewed and the jobs converted to government service.

Garry Richey, AETC director of logistics, installations and mission support, said during a visit to Enid Monday, this decision was the result of orders the Air Force was given to cut costs.

“We’ll save millions of dollars over the course of the five-year defense plan, I’m confident of that,” Richey said.

Richey said the decision to in-source the simulator instructor positions was driven strictly by economics, not because of any complaints with the contract instructors, who have been teaching students in simulators for the past 20 years at Vance and other pilot training bases.

During a meeting Monday with state Sen. Patrick Anderson, R-Enid, Richey said the savings would total \$6.9 million over the next five years, \$5.6 million of which would come from Sheppard AFB, Texas, \$1.3 million from Vance and Columbus AFB, Miss., as well as two Texas bases, Laughlin and Randolph. On Tuesday, local Lear Siegler officials received a copy of a letter from the Pentagon to U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn confirming that figure. Sheppard’s estimated savings is higher, the letter said, because it is home of the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program.

“I think it is a positive step forward in that we’ve got the numbers finally showing what the Air Force now says that they will save,” Anderson said. “We’ve got the contractor saying they will match those numbers. I think this is turning into a situation that can be a positive outcome for all parties.

“The Air Force will meet its goal of reducing costs, taxpayers will win because costs will go down and the families affected by this decision will not be uprooted and have their lives turned upside down.”

And if the transition to government service instructors takes place Oct. 1 as scheduled, Anderson said, it will affect more than simply the instructors and their families.

“I hope the Enid community realizes (simulator instructor) salaries at Vance are going to be cut by approximately \$2 million (annually),” Anderson said. “That is money that won’t be spent in local restaurants, or businesses, or car dealerships. That will affect everyone who lives in the community, whether they are a part of Vance Air Force Base or not. That is why it is such an important issue in our community.”

Denny admitted the company’s offer to match the Air Force’s projected savings through in-sourcing, coming just more than a week before the contract expires, is an 11th-hour effort.

“I think it is past the time to get it done,” he said. “We are going to make one last-ditch try, one final Hail Mary.”

David Smith, chief of the operations division of the AETC office of public affairs, said the transition to government service instructors will take place as scheduled next week.

“The process is going to go through,” Smith said. “Oct. 1 we are looking at a smooth transition.”

But Anderson, for one, holds out hope for an Air Force change of heart.

“All that has to take place is for Gen. (Stephen R.) Lorenz (commander of AETC) to say we are not going to in-source,” Anderson said. “All we have to have is one order changing everything and things can continue operating as they have for the last 20 years. We still have time to solve this problem. I hope the Air Force will listen to these families and the concern they are raising.”

Some 10 percent of the 85 instructors and support personnel under the current LSI contract have not been re-hired. Those who have will take an average pay cut of \$18,000, according to Vance simulators, which will have an estimated negative economic impact on Enid of \$1.5 million to \$2 million annually.

One of those who has not been re-hired by the government is veteran simulator instructor Jack “Pappy” Beam, Lear Siegler site manager for Vance and a combat pilot in Vietnam.

“As you can tell, URS LSI is doing everything possible to prove to the U.S. government that the government employees can save them no more money than we can as private contractors,” he said.

The government pays for a retirement program for its employees, while LSI doesn’t. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who has joined Anderson, U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe and Rep. Frank Lucas in speaking out against the in-sourcing plan, estimates each government employee costs taxpayers \$113,000 per year.