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Job Conversion at Vance Controversial

By Jeff Mullin, Senior Writer

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ENID — Garry Richey, director of logistics, installations and mission support for Air Education and Training Command, says the conversion of simulator instructor jobs at Vance Air Force Base from contract to government service will happen as planned Oct. 1.

State Sen. Patrick Anderson, R-Enid, and officials from Lear Siegler Services Inc., whose employees have been training pilots at Vance for the past 15 years, say not so fast.

“At this point in time it doesn’t appear the Air Force is going to change their course,” said Anderson, who met with Richey Monday at Vance, “but I am still holding out hope that they will take the opportunity to meet with the private contractor. We will fight until midnight Sept. 30 to get the Air Force to change directions.”

“We are still holding out hope that they (the Air Force) will get together with us at the table,” said Jack “Pappy” Beam, Lear Siegler site manager at Vance.

Anderson had the ear of four-star Gen. Duncan McNabb Saturday at the Oklahoma-Air Force football game. McNabb is not affiliated with AETC, but is commander of U.S. Transportation Command. Still, Anderson pleaded his case.

“I tried to emphasize my concerns about what the impact of the in-sourcing decision will have on Vance’s future,” Anderson said. “He is not involved in AETC, but it was at least worth trying to raise the issue. I want to keep up the fight.”

Anderson also said Monday he planned to call U.S. 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.

Last December the Air Force informed Lear Siegler the firm’s three-year flight simulator instruction contract, which expires Sept. 30, would not be renewed and the jobs would be converted to government service.

Richey said that plan is being carried out.

“We’re proceeding on as we’ve planned for quite some time now,” he said. “We’re right on schedule.”

The economics of the decision to in-source some 400 simulator instructor positions across AETC has been the subject of dispute of late. Initially the Air Force projected savings of \$480,000 over a five-year period. In August Anderson and the simulator instructors at Vance cited Air Force numbers projecting a \$27.5 million added cost to taxpayers over the same period as the result of in-sourcing.

On Monday, Richey said in-sourcing will not cost the government money, but will save it.

“We’ll save millions of dollars over the course of the five-year defense plan, I’m confident of that,” he said. “I think the computations we have done have been conservative.

“What I’m really concerned about is the assertion that it (in-sourcing) is going to cost us money. I can promise you we wouldn’t be doing this if it was costing us money.”

Richey did not give an exact figure for the amount of money in-sourcing will save taxpayers. Anderson, however, said during his meeting with Richey he was told the savings will total \$6.9 million over the next five years.

“They didn’t provide me anything to document that,” Anderson said. “They at first said over five years all the bases affected would save \$480,000, now they tell me that number is wrong. They have yet to provide me information about how they came to that \$6.9 million figure.”

Beam said Scott Ogle, program manager for Lear Siegler, Inc., the man in charge of the simulator instructor program throughout AETC, said Monday the company was willing to “meet or match” the Air Force’s projected \$6.9 million in savings over five years, even though LSI normally works only under three-year contracts.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates offered a glimmer of hope last month when he said: “We weren’t seeing the savings we had hoped from in-sourcing,” and said “no more full-time positions in these organizations will be created after this fiscal year to replace contractors.”

Richey said Gates’ edict was limited to “his office and some of the combatant commands.”

“We got a clarification that this did not apply to the services,” Richey said. “He was talking about his staff and joint commands. The military services had been given targets (for in-sourcing) and we were to pursue those targets, and we are.”

Simulator instructors at Vance and other undergraduate pilot training bases like Laughlin AFB, Texas, and Columbus AFB, Miss., were told they would have to re-apply for their jobs and there was no guarantee they would be re-hired.

“One of the most frustrating things is that people who have been instructors at Vance for years are moving to other bases to take the same jobs, and yet they have open positions at Vance,” Anderson said. “There is no common sense for them to operate the way they have been. I think they are making a mistake.”

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 sim

instructors, which will have an estimated negative economic impact on Enid of \$1.5 million to \$2 million annually.

The flexibility of government employees was called into question by the LSI simulator instructors, given federal work rules.

“If you look at the schedule, LSI, for the same amount of money, can give them a lot more sims than government service instructors can and have greater flexibility in the scheduling of training pilots here at Vance,” Beam said.

But Col. Roger Witek, vice commander of 71st Flying Training Wing, said the wing will expect government service instructors to be as flexible as contractors.

“One day the sim requirements might be, ‘We need you to do sims for 10 hours,’” Witek said. “The next day, a half-day might be obliterated by thunderstorms, which takes out flying and the sims because of lightning protection. They might do six hours that day. There’s going to be some flexibility expected.”

Witek said the Air Force’s expectation is it will be business as usual if the in-sourcing happens as scheduled Oct. 1.

“We are looking for a seamless transition,” Witek said, “but that seamlessness took a lot of effort.”