



Google™

Search

 Web www.nwbusinessmonthly.com

Volume 32 • Issue 7 • July 2007

Note: Online edition is only partially provided, to receive a complete issue subscribe to our print edition.

[Back to content page](#)

A match made ... on Whidbey Island
Oak Harbor and NAS Whidbey Island co-exist in perfect harmony

By Amanda Baltazar



Volunteers from NAS Whidbey Island come to the aid of the local community when the need arises.

Captain R. Sydney Abernethy, commanding officer of the Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island, talks about the relationship between the station and the Oak Harbor community it stands beside almost as he might describe the relationship he shares with his wife.

"I've been stationed in many places in 26 years and there's no better place that's more supportive than Oak Harbor," he says. "It's the most military-friendly place I've been, and I think [the relationship] is unique but also heartfelt from the leadership for Oak Harbor, which makes a big difference."

NAS Whidbey Island was commissioned on Sept. 21, 1942, just in time to become an important West Coast base during World War II. It now boasts 8,744 enlisted personnel (Navy, Marines, Air Force, Army and Canadian Forces), 13,000 of their family members and 13,000 retirees.

The numbers surpass those of Oak Harbor, a town of 19,795, according to the 2000 census, and some 2,000 residents work for the base. In fact, the base is the largest employer in all of the counties surrounding it, according to Sharon Hart, executive director of the Island County Economic Development Council. "And in the state of Washington, one in four jobs is connected to the military, so we have the most dependent area."

But it's not just about a working relationship. "The naval base is totally ingrained

Ads by Google

[Navy Job Center](#)

Search thousands of jobs for free - Veterans of all sea-service welcome
www.navyleague.info

[Getaway to Whidbey Island](#)

Enjoy Whidbey's Wonderful Lodgings B&B's, Inns, Cabins and Cottages
www.coupevillelodging.com

[Beach House For Sale](#)

Keystone Beach Whidbey Island Washington
www.keystonebeachhome.com

[Whidbey island homes](#)

Whidbey Island real estate site search here for homes or land
www.tomwhiterealestate.com

[Whidbey Island](#)

Real estate searches Waterfront & view cabins and homes.
www.garyingram.net



Members of the NAS Whidbey

in the community and you can't separate the two," says Hart.

Community partnership

"The sailors are part of the community so you treat them like anyone walking down the street," says Jill Johnson, director of the Greater Oak Harbor Chamber of Commerce. "They're just a little cleaner-cut, and younger, but there are also a lot of families. I've heard of communities where they have strip clubs, etc., but we don't have that here. Because we want a good relationship, everybody works at it."

Rather than belonging to Oak Harbor, the naval base is part of it. "This would be a completely different town without [the military] and not one we'd like to think about," Johnson adds. "We're an island community and it's easy to get isolated but we have new people coming in and they bring new things, new ideas. Otherwise, we wouldn't have that in a community this size. That keeps us progressive in our thinking."

The naval base is a microcosm on Whidbey Island, containing most of the things that those who live there need. There's a Subway, McDonald's, a bowling alley, barbershop, post office, playground, hospital, chapel and two exchanges offering clothes, flowers, groceries, and services such as video rentals and dry cleaning. All of these are priced to compete fairly with local businesses. "But we want to get [the sailors] into the community," says Hart.

The local communities are an important part of the lives of the enlisted. "[They] provide homes, schools, churches, recreational activities and places to shop – not only for the men and women who work at NAS Whidbey Island, but for their families and a large population of retirees as well," says Kimberly Martin, public affairs officer for NAS Whidbey Island.

The relationship between the naval base and Oak Harbor covers just about everything imaginable. By patronizing local businesses, Navy personnel and their families are helping support them. The military also plants trees on Arbor Day and adopts parts of the roads to keep them clean.

They also go one step further and are frequent volunteers in the community. In fact, they constitute close to 29 percent of volunteers in the school district, says Martha Walling, community resources coordinator for the district.

"Each military partnership has a coordinator who's responsible for helping to recruit and let people know about our needs," she explains. These needs can range from chaperoning dances and working in the classrooms to building walking trails and making posters. Between 45 and 65 percent of the kids in Oak Harbor's schools are from military families and 68 percent of kids in Oak Harbor are military-impacted.

Military personnel also volunteer in other activities, including the creation of Fort Nugent Park, a play area for Oak Harbor residents that opened last July. "People worked from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and this thing grew overnight," says Sue Karahalios, city council member.

The relationship between town and base, while not quite a marriage, is certainly symbiotic, "and the sense of teamwork, cooperation and genuine appreciation for what each brings to the table is what allows them to excel," says Martin. A recent example of this teamwork the joint purchase of land near to the base.

The City Council last year passed an ordinance to restrict land use on this property within "accident potential zones" off the end of a runway at the Navy base, as well as an adjacent buffer zone.

Mayor Patty Cohen supports the move, the likes of which had not been seen before. "This was a first," she says.

Cohen backed the zoning restriction once she'd seen a map released by the Navy, showing about 60 acres of the city that fall within accident potential zones – areas where airplane accidents are more likely to happen.

To show appreciation for the things the military does and, indeed, for simply being there, the Oak Harbor community throws an annual fall picnic at Windjammer Park. "They make a lot of sacrifices and we want to thank them for that," says Johnson. "It's hard when your spouse is gone for a lot of the time and there are

Island 1st Class Petty Officers Association pack boxes full of treats to send to augmentees from the base who are currently serving in various locations around the world.

Ads by Google

[Whidbey Beach Rental](#)

From Your Bed To The Beach In This Owner Direct Vacation Home Rental

www.vrbo.com/134734

[Attorneys on Whidbey Is.](#)

Serving Island County, WA Truitt & Lyons, Attorneys at Law

www.TruittAndLyons.com

[Oak Harbor Search](#)

Official Home Search in the Seattle area. Real Estate for Western WA

www.TheMLSonline.com

[Coachman Inn Oak Harbor](#)

Welcoming Your VIP's to Whidbey Island - "Worth Checking Into!"

www.thecoachmaninn.com

[Whidbey Real Estate Lady](#)

Search for Island homes or land Find your place on Whidbey

www.gailpierce.com



Emergency personnel from both NAS Whidbey Island and Oak Harbor respond to 911 calls.

[Oak Harbor Search](#)

Official Home Search in

lots of single-parent families.”

The picnic is free for military personnel and their families and between 1,000 and 1,500 of them attend. Locals also participate, although they have to pay.

The Navy personnel also hold events from time to time to raise money to pump back into the local community, says Johnson, but aren't often looking for money back. “The Navy's very self-funding. When squadrons come home the community tries to help but I've never seen the Navy with its hand out to us.”

Open dialog

Having a relationship as fluid as this one, does take a little work, however, and resting on laurels is not something that either the naval base or the local community does with any regularity.

Every quarter Captain Abernethy holds a community leadership forum with civic and political leaders to bring issues to the table and talk about how the base and the city can share resources and make sure they are, between them, providing the highest possible level of service – from the sewers to the water and the security system. In terms of water, the two sides work together perfectly: The city checks the water and the pipes, and because it does this, the base pays for any repairs, says Karahalios.

The base, explains Johnson, has resources the community wouldn't have access to otherwise, such as the water and sewers. “Because they're out here, we're a little higher on the food chain,” she says.

Discussions about what kind of businesses can go on the property just outside the base are a regular occurrence. “Lots of conversations go on to make sure it doesn't hinder the Navy's ability to do its job,” Johnson said.

One issue that was announced recently at a forum was that the Navy would no longer provide after-school care in the community for non-military children. “But we gave them enough time to research alternatives; we didn't just pull the plug,” Abernethy points out.

One of the big issues the forum has dealt with is that of emergency services, and now the naval base's services and Oak Harbor's work in unison. “There's no question that ... if there's an emergency like an earthquake, we could work together seamlessly,” says Abernethy. And for a 911 emergency, both respond.

Close to home

Whidbey Island is a great place to live and work but sadness hit the entire area on April 6 this year: Three of the naval base's enlisted were killed in Iraq when a rocket hit their vehicle. At this point, local businesses helped raise money and put it into an account for the families, says Johnson. “Any time anyone dies in the line of duty it's a reminder for all of us that they do a dangerous job. It's also a humbling reminder of their patronage.”

The base has a memorial for those who are lost, but this April, the town didn't fail to do its own thing, decorating trees with ribbons to remember the sacrifice of the three men.

As well, the new Oak Harbor High School's stadium will have a military memorial, recognizing the base's support. “It shows how we're held in high esteem,” says Abernethy.

And it's not just for those who've been lost: When a deployed squadron or command returns home to NAS Whidbey Island from a carrier or war zone, local residents put up signs in the windows of local businesses welcoming them back. Oak Harbor takes its “safety net” responsibility seriously, explains Martin. “It's this dedication to supporting the military and their families that allows the military member to leave their family here and concentrate on the mission at hand.”

It won't seem strange if you've read this far to realize that there's very little disgruntlement created by the presence of NAS Whidbey Island. The noise from low-flying airplanes can take a little getting used to and some people do complain, says Johnson. “It can get loud at times but it's also part of the culture. I think it

the Seattle area. Near
Estate for Western WA
www.TheMLSonline.com

takes a little while to adjust and people in certain areas sign acknowledgements when they buy a house to say they know about the noise.”
“I think there could be friction in other communities but we’ve had an open dialogue,” she points out. An example of this is that the Navy lets the town know if it’s going to change its flight patterns.

Base is economic booster

Oak Harbor certainly wouldn’t be the place it is today without NAS Whidbey Island, and the city’s growth is attributed largely to the base’s inauguration in 1942 (as well as to the 1935 construction of Deception Pass, a bridge linking Whidbey Island with Fidalgo Island). The naval base consists of two sections totaling some 7,073 acres, as well as two additional locations that are used as an alternate runway and a bombing range.

According to Martin, in 2006, NAS Whidbey Island brought over \$500 million to the local economy. Broken down, the Navy paid \$406.9 million in payroll (\$364.1 million to military personnel, and \$42.8 million to civilian employees), in addition to \$20 million for facility maintenance, vehicles and utilities and an estimated \$75 million for military construction.

More than 10,066 people work on the base, constituting 68 percent of total employment in the surrounding area. The annual payroll of these military and civilian employees in 2003 was is \$399.1 million, or 52 percent of countywide earnings.

A number of contractors now work on the base, such as American Eagle, which is building 360 new homes for sailors on the base under a new public-private venture. The military has only started privatizing this part of its business in the past four years, explains council member Karahalios, “because that’s what Washington, D.C., decided.”

Contracts emanating from the base for different goods, services and construction totaled \$12.2 million in 2003.

Karahalios herself moved to Oak Harbor when she was in ninth grade, when her father was stationed at the base. “I ended up loving it and raising my family here,” she says. “It was the stability and I loved the feeling of community. Oak Harbor takes great pride in that feeling.”

[Back to content page](#)

[Click here to subscribe to the Northwest Business Monthly Magazine](#)

[HOME](#) | [MAGAZINE](#) | [PAST ISSUES](#) | [SPECIAL EVENTS](#) | [VIP CLIENTS](#) | [EDITORIAL CALENDAR](#) | [ADVERTISING INFO](#) | [PRESS RELEASE](#) | [CONTACT INFO](#)

Northwest Business Monthly, 1732 Iowa Street, Bellingham, WA 98229 • (360) 671-3933 • Fax (360) 671-3934