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Mayport to get nuclear carrier

Jacksonville Business Journal – by Stewart Verney

Naval Station Mayport will be getting a nuclear-powered carrier, the Navy told key Florida lawmakers Monday.

The Navy informed Sens. Bill Nelson and Mel Martinez and Rep. Ander Crenshaw that Mayport will be a home port for a nuclear carrier.

Nelson received word around noon in a phone call from Secretary of the Navy Donald Winter.

The Navy is scheduled to officially release a final environmental impact statement Nov. 21 concerning the possibility of shifting ships to Mayport from Norfolk, Va. The study evaluated the impact of more than a dozen alternatives that included a nuclear carrier, destroyers and amphibious ships.

The option chosen by the Navy, contained in a recommendation from Winter to the Secretary of Defense, is for adding just a nuclear carrier.

“They chose the option to have an additional nuclear aircraft carrier without the additional ships,” Nelson said. “However that doesn’t mean there will not be additional ships.”

The move will have a huge economic impact on Mayport.

“Today’s announcement is a huge victory for Mayport, Northeast Florida and for U.S. national security,” Crenshaw said.

The draft environmental impact statement the Navy completed earlier this year estimated that it would cost \$400 million to make Mayport nuclear-capable. That work would include deepening the channel. The nuclear carrier will bring thousands of new jobs to Mayport.

“You’re talking about 3,200 permanent jobs,” Nelson said. “That’s 3,200 new families. Look at the multiplier through the economy as a result of that. In addition, when the air squadrons come in and are on the ship, it’s up to 5,000.”

Local officials have been making the case for Mayport for years and are hoping the Navy will shift some ships south from Norfolk, Va. Since the decommissioning of the Mayport-based USS John F. Kennedy last year, all of the Navy’s East Coast aircraft carriers are based in Norfolk.

Crenshaw, Nelson and Martinez have argued that national security will be better served by not concentrating all the carriers at one base.

Nelson dismissed the possibility that the Secretary of Defense will overrule the Secretary of the Navy, or that the Virginia delegation in Congress can somehow get the decision reversed.

“For all intents and purposes it’s a done deal,” he said.