

It took a recent visit to Norfolk, Va., for John Bloom to realize he has a lot of tense company these days.

Military communities nationwide are bracing for the Department of Defense to release the list of defense facilities it wants to consolidate with other bases or close completely, a process known as base realignment and closure, or BRAC.

Bloom, president of the Indian Head Defense Alliance, has headed up efforts over the last decade to promote the critical importance of the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Indian Head Division, to the military and the local economy.

"I've become so personally involved about this thing that I think BRAC is only about Indian Head," he said. But after reading a report in The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot on BRAC's impact in the Hampton Roads region, "I realize there may be about 150 other bases across the county that may be closed, realigned or left alone. Indian Head is small potatoes in the big picture."

Bloom hopes his endeavors will help save Indian Head from being included on the Department of Defense's recommendations to the nine-member BRAC commission, to be unveiled May 13. But as he told a group of western Charles County businesspeople last week, "Indian Head is on the bubble."

Many groups and prominent individuals have advocated for Indian Head as decision-makers toured military installations across the country. The Navy has declared its support, as have Maryland's state and federal legislators.

But as the countdown has reached its final month, Bloom and other advocates are in the dark about the thinking of the tight-lipped decision-makers.

"They are naturally and understandably unwilling to discuss it," said Bloom, superintendent of Charles County Public Schools from 1981 to 1993. "... We'll continue to pound away on it, but the window of opportunity to influence anyone is almost shut."

The Indian Head naval facility is the county's largest employer, with about 3,600 workers -- half of whom are Charles County residents -- and its continued existence is crucial to the economic vitality of both Indian Head and Charles County.

"We're a relatively small town, so any commercial or business activity that goes on is going to rely heavily on the consumers that the base provides," said Indian Head Mayor Edward A. Rice.

Attempts to revitalize the sleepy town at the end of Indian Head Highway hinge on the base's continued existence.

"It's important for us to see the base thrive, that it not downsize, because that's just going to hurt the town's ability to attract commercial activity," said Rice, who worked for 34 years at the base and neighboring Stump Neck Annex. "The main thing we can do as citizens is indicate or show that there is a good relationship between the base and the town."

Charles County Commissioners' President F. Wayne Cooper said the BRAC judgment is the "single most important decision that will be made that will affect the county this year."

Shutting down Indian Head would be as devastating to Charles County as closing the Pentagon would be to Northern Virginia, said Cooper (D). The ripple effect could cripple service industries affiliated with the base and harm retail sales and residential construction in the region.

"I don't want to use the word crisis or disaster, but I think it's something that all of us in Charles County should be very concerned with," he said. "I'm hoping something good will come out of it, and hopefully we don't have to deal with it for many, many years," he said.

As Bloom, 73, presides over his second BRAC process -- Indian Head was spared in the 1995 round of base closures -- he recognizes that all military installations are more vulnerable this time around because the Defense Department could close or realign up to 25 percent of its

bases.

"What we're faced with now ... is a process that will close or realign over 100 bases, which is more than all of the previous BRACs combined," he said.

Additionally, the 1995 military consolidation followed two other BRACs in 1989 and 1993. The current process is expected to be far more widespread and far more difficult "because all of the [easy-to-close bases] have been closed," Bloom said.

In the past decade, the state has also become much more involved in protecting military installations, with the 2003 establishment of the Maryland Military Installation Strategic Planning Council, a group of state appointees that has aimed to properly position Maryland's bases ahead of BRAC.

On the federal level, U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer and U.S. Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) and Paul S. Sarbanes (D) have tried to throw their influential muscle around in courting key defense officials. The BRAC decision is likely to have major ramifications in Hoyer's congressional district, which also includes Patuxent River Naval Air Station in Lexington Park, Andrews Air Force Base in Camp Springs and other installations.

"I think we're in as good a shape as we could put ourselves in," Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville told Gazette editors in Southern Maryland.

Although Hoyer said that the Pentagon has long discussed downsizing Indian Head by consolidating the base's energetics component to a larger base such as the Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division at China Lake in California, the cost to move the operation would be prohibitive.

Plus, Bloom said, the cross-service tenants at the base such as the Naval Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technology Division, Joint Interoperability Test Command and Marine Corps Chemical Biological Incident Response Force are assets because they bridge military gaps.

"It is acknowledged by everyone ... in the decision-making process ... that what Indian Head does has high military value," he said. "They're not going to stop doing it; the only question is whether they are going to stop doing it at Indian Head, either all of it or some of it. If it didn't have much military value, we'd be riding a dead horse."

With few, if any, minds left to sway, Bloom is left to understand that he is among hundreds of military supporters in communities big and small that want to avoid the BRAC chopping block.

"The Department of Defense is focusing all around the country. They have a lot of fish to fry," he said. "... I think that if we get some negative news ... we'll deal with it, but we believe strongly that the military value of the base and a fair process will prevail."

Staff Writer Paul C. Leibe contributed to this report.