

House dedicates millions to unneeded missile system

By Kellan Howell

Thursday, April 30, 2015

In what some are calling a political power play, Congress moved Thursday to approve the national defense budget that includes millions of dollars for a missile-defense site that Pentagon officials have repeatedly said is unneeded.

The 2016 National Defense Authorization Act passed late Wednesday by the House Armed Services Committee includes \$30 million in funding for design and planning of an East Coast missile defense site. Construction of the site, which would be used to defend the U.S. against long-range missiles from rogue states, is expected to cost at least \$3 billion.

But Pentagon officials and watchdog groups say that the missile site isn't needed and that the money could be put to better use.

The U.S. already has two missile defense sites in Alaska and California that are capable of intercepting North Korean missiles and anything launched from Iran, should that threat develop. Iran does not have a long-range missile capable of reaching the U.S.

Neither the Obama administration nor the Missile Defense Agency has asked for an East Coast site, but Congress has pushed for the effort anyway.

Budget analysts say the Pentagon is often used as a pork barrel for lawmakers who want to pour money into their districts via the defense budget.

"The Pentagon comes out every year with their budget request where they prioritize which weapons systems they want to invest in, what they want to retire, and what they want to update or upgrade. Then, not infrequently, Congress comes back and for various reasons, in a lot of cases because Congress views the Pentagon budget as an economic budget tool or pork barrel for people's districts, they come back and give the Pentagon more than what they ask for," said Lindsay Koshgarian, research director at the National Priorities Project.

For pushing unnecessary funding in the latest defense budget at the expense of taxpayers, the House Armed Services Committee wins this week's Golden Hammer; a weekly distinction awarded by The Washington Times that highlights the most egregious examples of wasteful federal spending.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, Texas Republican and House Armed Services Committee chairman, did not respond to a request for comment by The Times.

Possible locations for the proposed missile defense site include Fort Drum in upstate New York; Naval Air Station Portsmouth SERE Training Area in Maine; Camp Ravenna Joint Training Center in Ohio and Fort Custer Training Center in Michigan.

Rep. Elise Stefanik, New York Republican, sponsored the budget amendment to fund the East Coast site. Fort Drum is in her district.

Ms. Stefanik also offered an amendment to the military construction veterans affairs appropriations bill to shift the \$30 million in funding for site. The NDAA simply authorizes the funding, but the amendment in appropriations bill would secure it.

Tom Flanagan, a spokesman for Ms. Stefanik, said his boss was focused on maintaining and improving the nation's defenses.

"This is about maintaining our nation's readiness, and an East Coast Missile Defense Site provides increased battle space, more decision time, increased reliability, more inventory and a different angle of intercept," Mr. Flanagan said, adding that retired Army Gen. Charles Jacoby, a former head of U.S. Northern Command, "stated that a third site would give him an increased battle space and increased opportunity for him to engage threats from either Iran or North Korea."

But in 2013 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mr. Jacoby said. "We currently can defend the entire United States from an Iranian long-range missile threat."

What it really comes down to is local politics, said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense.

"She's got at least a 25 percent chance that the site will end up in her district, maybe even better than that," Mr. Ellis said.

The East Coast system would detect incoming missiles and launch missiles to destroy them before impact using an "exoatmospheric kill vehicle" (a small flying device on the tip of a ground-based interceptor missile) that seeks out targets using cutting-edge sensors, a significant update to the ground-based midcourse defense system being used already.

However, the Pentagon already maintains a fleet of 30 rocketlike interceptors as part of the ground-based midcourse defense system and is planning to increase the number of interceptors stored at Fort Greely in Alaska and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California to 44 by 2017.

Watchdogs say that Congress falls into wasteful spending habits under the assumption that less spending will hurt national defenses.

"In the end there is this fallacy that a of lawmakers buy in to, which is spending more on particular weapons systems is going to make us safer when in reality, it's smart spending that is going to make us stronger," Mr. Ellis said.

Nicole Kaeding, a budget analyst with the Cato Institute argued that the wasteful budget highlights a hypocritical culture of defense spending among Republican lawmakers.

"The new Republican budget deal increases defense spending above the 2011 debt ceiling deal, because some Republicans claim that we are not spending enough on defense; the slow growth in defense spending is harmful to our national security. Yet, at the same time, some Republicans are pushing to fund a new missile site that even the Pentagon doesn't want, wasting millions. Those two positions seem contradictory," Ms. Kaeding said.