

Despite BRAC, Brunswick air show to live on

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BRUNSWICK, Maine — Brunswick Naval Air Station will soon close, but the tradition of the Great State of Maine Air Show will live on.

The Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority will hold the air show in the summer of 2011, and it will feature the Navy's Blue Angels just as in years past. The visit by the Navy's flight demonstration team will coincide with the 100th anniversary of Navy aviation.

The civilian air show will feature a business aviation expo aimed at showcasing the shuttered Navy base's capabilities for the private sector. The authority hopes to attract tenants who'll utilize the massive hangars and dual runways, said Steve Levesque, the authority's executive director.

"The Great State of Maine Air Show has been a long-standing tradition that we want to keep. A lot of people look forward to coming to the show," he said.

Because it's a business expo, there may be more Boeings and Gulf streams parked on the tarmac than military aircraft, which used to dominate past air shows. The redevelopment authority hopes to attract businesses that repair, maintain and overhaul large jets, Levesque said.

"The whole idea is that Brunswick is open for business," he said.

Brunswick, once home to 4,000 sailors and six patrol squadrons, is in the process of shutting down in keeping with a 2005 vote of a base closing commission. Its two runways are scheduled to close next month and the base will close for good in May 2011. The air show will be on Aug. 27-28.

Air shows have been a tradition for more than four decades. The first air show featuring the Navy's Blue Angels coincided with a visit by President John F. Kennedy in 1962. Kennedy met with the six pilots and maintenance crew before departing for a Maine island where he was vacationing.

Over the years, the event grew in popularity. On air show weekends, Brunswick became the state's largest city with 100,000 spectators if the weather was good.

Pilots have fond memories of the lobster bake held on base. In recent years, that evolved into a Friday night party dubbed the "Afterburner Blast."

The Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority wants to keep many of those traditions, but some things will be different. For starters, the show won't be free following the Navy's departure. Elsewhere admission is typically \$10 to \$12 at civilian air shows, Levesque said.

Also, hundreds of volunteers will be needed. In the past, the Navy said it took 800 volunteers to pull off the air shows.

There are other logistical issues, as well. The tank farm will be closed so jet fuel will have to be trucked in, and there'll be a temporary control tower established. Proceeds from the two-day event will go to the redevelopment authority, its partners and charities, Levesque said.