

As Wagner prepares to leave Aurora's Buckley, base building keeps eye on the future

"Buckley will be here anchored in Aurora for a long, long time just because we have invested here."

By *Brandon Johansson, staff writer*, Updated: July 29, 2016 11:11 am

AURORA | Despite being Aurora's biggest employer, Buckley Air Force Base has long been a bit mysterious to many Aurora residents.

Even Col. John Wagner, the base's commander for the past two years, said he has heard from residents who don't know much about the base or what goes on there, even though there's a lot more to Buckley than the iconic white orbs visible from much of Aurora.

"We are looking globally from here," Wagner said. "Our boots aren't in the desert, our boots aren't in the Pacific, our boots aren't in the jungles, but we are looking 24/7, 365 all around the globe — including over the poles."

And what the airmen at Buckley are looking for is pretty crucial — missiles.



U.S. Air force Col. John Wagner, commander of the 460th Space Wing on Wednesday July 13, 2016 at Buckley Air Force Base. Col Wagner will be changing commands in August. Photo by Carl Glenn Payne/Aurora Sentinel

Wagner said those missiles are the “most dangerous weapons on the planet,” and because weapons technology keeps advancing, they are becoming more and more dangerous each day.

That’s what makes the base’s missile defense warning efforts so crucial, Wagner said, whether it’s warning troops on the other side of the world or leaders in Washington, D.C. about an attack on the homeland.

“It is truly life and death in many cases around the globe,” he said.

Wagner is wrapping up his two-year stint as commander of the 460th Space Wing next month. From Buckley, he will head to National Defense University in D.C. to teach national security strategy to other colonels.

Base commanders typically serve two-year terms, and Wagner said his time at Buckley has been a “fast-paced ride.”

During that stretch, the base has seen something of a building boom that followed a brief lull in construction there.

When the Air Force “stood up” Buckley as a full-fledged Air Force Base in 2000, the base saw a building boom that made it the Air Force’s fastest-growing base for several years. But as many of those construction projects were completed, construction at the base slowed.

Wagner said that trend has reversed and Buckley is growing again.

In the past couple of years, the base added a new shooting range, replaced several buildings that dated back more than four decades and refurbished the runway.

Wagner said that new runway was especially important because the new one will last 50 years.

The last runway was built in the 1940s, Wagner said.

“For the next 50 years only minor maintenance has to take place,” he said.

But just as important as the construction on the base, Wagner said, is the efforts along Buckley’s border. The base has been working with Arapahoe County and the state of Colorado to purchase land along the base’s edge to act as a buffer between the often-loud flight operations there and the rapidly-growing Aurora neighborhoods that surround Buckley.

If bases become a nuisance for the communities where they reside, they often don’t last, he said. That was the case with Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Wagner said.

A buffer zone is especially important if Buckley is going to lure the F-35 fighter jet, Wagner said, because those pricey aircraft make a lot of noise.

“Hopefully this will help us preserve long-term,” he said. “I’m trying not only to look at the Buckley Air Force Base of 2016, but the Buckley Air Force Base of 2026 and 2036.”

Kevin Hougen, CEO of the Aurora Chamber, said those efforts are crucial not just for Aurora’s economy, but for the state’s aerospace industry.

Companies from around the state use the base to send their products around the country and world, Hougen said.

“Most of the aerospace industry could be affected by Buckley in the state of Colorado,” he said.

Wagner said that as he leaves Buckley next month, he is confident the base will be a major part of Aurora for years to come.

“Buckley will be here anchored in Aurora for a long, long time just because we have invested here,” he said.