

**Text of Congressman Gene Taylor's Letter to Defense Secretary
Rumsfeld**

March 9, 2006

The Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I write to express my strong disappointment with the Department of Defense's recommendations provided to Congress last week concerning the future of the Armed Forces Retirement Home at Gulfport, Mississippi.

The Armed Forces Retirement Home at Gulfport (AFRH-G), more commonly known as the U.S. Naval Home, sustained damage from Hurricane Katrina's winds and the accompanying storm surge that flooded the ground floor of the structures on the AFRH-G campus. The day following the storm, approximately 400 residents of the facility were relocated to facilities at the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, DC. The majority of the Naval Home residents remain at the Washington, DC AFRH campus today.

As you may know, Congress provided the DOD \$45 million in emergency supplemental appropriations to initiate advance planning and design, as well as to begin repair efforts needed to restore the U.S. Naval Home to full occupancy. The Congress also requested that your department report back to it within 60 days on the progress of these efforts.

On March 1, 2006, I received a copy of the DOD's report along with a letter from Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David S.C. Chu. While the report proposes five "options" for the Naval Home, only two of them actually recommend reopening the facility at Gulfport. In Option 1, the existing facilities at AFRH-G would be repaired and undergo extensive modification over a 13-year period. Under Option 2, the existing structures at the facility would be demolished and replaced with newly constructed buildings. The costs for Option 1 and Option 2 are \$589.4 million and \$389.9 million respectively. These are eye-popping figures that cannot be taken seriously or justified under any reasonable analysis.

I am deeply troubled that the most obvious option, simply restoring the Naval Home to its pre-Katrina condition, is not included among the recommendations considered. The residences at the Naval Home are located in an 11-story tower. **I have toured the facility, and I can attest to the fact that the dwellings that are not on the ground floor level were largely untouched by the effects of the storm. The facilities manager for the Naval Home has estimated that the residential tower and supporting facilities could be fully restored to pre-Katrina condition for \$80 million - \$90 million.** If for no other purpose than for comparison's sake, an option to restore the residence tower to pre-Katrina condition should be included in the report.

I am also concerned that the report's cost-analysis is flawed because it compares the cost for constructing state-of-the-art facilities at Gulfport with the existing antiquated facilities in Washington. For this comparison to be valid, the cost to upgrade the formerly moth-balled facilities in Washington to the same standards proposed for Gulfport should be part of the same comparison. In fact, a new or renovated facility in Washington, DC is likely to be significantly more expensive based on area cost factors used by the DOD in estimating construction costs around the country.

Make no mistake, I support providing the veterans residing in both AFRH homes with appropriate and modern facilities. I cannot support any plan that has a long-term objective of housing our honored veterans in substandard conditions. I am troubled by what is contained in the report you provided me about the facility conditions at the AFRH-Washington. Surely, you cannot expect that such an inadequate facility is a suitable long-term solution.

Other options not considered in the report were the suitability of military dormitory or existing commercial designs for the Naval Home. For example, the DOD's Fiscal Year 2007 budget request recently forwarded to Congress contains specific requests for the construction of military dormitories at installations throughout the U.S. These projects, which accommodate between 120-150 persons, range from \$15 million to \$20 million. Common features of these military dormitory designs include community areas for residents, consolidated dayrooms, kitchenettes or fully-equipped kitchens, mailrooms, and laundry facilities. These designs could be cost-effectively adapted to accommodate the elderly, and scaled to meet the desired capacity for a fraction of the cost proposed in either of options recommended by DOD. I am also aware that there are private industry estimates stating that a new Naval Home facility could be built to the desired standards for \$125 million-\$150 million.

The report also contains numerous biased statements such as, “It seems ‘unconscionable’ to put residents back in ‘harms way’ in terms of potential future hurricanes” and “A return to Gulfport will signal the Government ‘gold seal’ that every thing is safe”. Frankly, Mr. Secretary, these statements are offensive to me and the people I represent. They are utterly inappropriate and completely incongruent with President Bush’s publicly stated commitment to rebuild the federal facilities damaged by Hurricane Katrina (most recently reaffirmed during his January 12, 2006, press conference in Hancock County, Mississippi).

Given that the outcome of the report and its recommendations seem predetermined to close the Naval Home at Gulfport, I request that you provide me not later than March 22, 2006, a copy of the contract file and copies of the government’s and contractor’s notes in order that I may understand the analysis that led to such erroneous recommendations.

Mr. Secretary, the Naval Home residents are eager to return to Gulfport as quickly as possible. I urge you to withdraw the report and promptly get on with the task of rebuilding the Naval Home at Gulfport.

Sincerely,

/original signed/

GENE TAYLOR
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable David S.C. Chu