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Article published Feb 3, 2014

## Submarine base 'never better' despite a tight budget

By [Jennifer McDermott](#) Day Staff Writer

### New commander puts focus on small upgrades

**Groton** - When the new commander of the Naval Submarine Base hosts visitors, he takes them to the gym.

In an era of budget cuts, austerity and downsizing, Capt. Carl A. Lahti is focusing on some of the smaller projects at the base that can help the Navy achieve one of its top goals of reducing energy consumption, and position the installation for the future.

In the three gyms on the base, Lahti replaced the old light bulbs with high-efficiency LED lighting. The lights, which turn off when there is enough light from the windows, will save \$39,000 each year - money that can now be better spent on warfighting, Lahti explains while looking up at the lights and sincerely expressing his desire to be a good steward of taxpayer money.

The base will open its new \$15 million, 57,000-square-foot commissary in April, followed by the renovated barracks, Fulton Hall, likely in May. Lahti cut the ribbon in January for an addition to the base's Youth Center. The budget for utilities at the base for this fiscal year is about \$17 million and Lahti said he is currently \$1.1 million under budget.

Lahti's top priority is to replace a pier on the lower base with a wider, modern pier, but that \$50 million to \$60 million project has not yet been funded in the military construction program.

"It would be easier if I had a little bit more money to do some more facilities improvements or some maintenance but we're able to currently live with what we have," Lahti said in an interview.

Despite the fiscal constraints, Lahti, who became the commander in late May, said the base has "never been better."

"We are continuing to upgrade the infrastructure on the installation and we're continuing to get highly trained employees and sailors that work here, and we're continuing to move the submarine force forward," he said. "We have the greatest attack submarine force in the world and the newest submarines come here first. And so I would say that we've never been better."

The Pentagon targeted the base in past rounds of base closings and nearly closed it in 2005. Lahti said the base is capable of operating for another century and his job is to prepare it to do just that.

The Defense Department asked Congress to authorize another Base Realignment and Closure process, but so far Congress has refused. There have been reports, though, that the Defense Department, to save money in other ways, is looking to close commissaries.

Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, dismissed the rumor on Tuesday but did say that officials asked the Defense Commissary Agency for a range of options, including how the system would operate with reduced or no taxpayer subsidies, according to the DOD. Last year the agency received \$1.5 billion in subsidies.

Concerned sailors and veterans have asked Lahti about the rumored closures. There are similar concerns throughout the region, Lahti said, because the commissary "is a wonderful benefit, and

if it goes away it will eat into the paycheck of our military families." Groceries at the base commissary cost 20 percent to 30 percent less than at other grocery stores, he added.

Lahti said the only direction he has been given is to open the new commissary when it is ready.

In the coming year, Lahti expects to begin building an electrical microgrid to power the piers and critical infrastructure on the lower base during an outage, and finish cleaning all of the contaminated sites so the base can come off the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list in 2015. The plan was to build a microgrid to power the entire base but those plans were scaled back to a smaller, \$3 million to \$10 million project. Lahti said he is exploring his options for funding from the state and private companies.

The female officers who will be the first women to serve on attack submarines will arrive at the base by January. Lahti said the only thing he may need to do is stock more female uniforms in the store on the base. The barracks and medical services already accommodate the women who are stationed on shore in Groton, he added.

The attack submarines on the East Coast will begin reporting to the submarine force commander in Norfolk, Va., instead of to a rear admiral in Groton in the fall. And while Lahti said he will miss consulting with Rear Adm. Kenneth M. Perry, the commander of Submarine Group Two, on leadership issues, the Navy's decision to cut the position should not have a significant impact on the base.

Lahti said his vision for his time in command is to complete the mission of deploying attack submarines and training the submarine force each day, and position the base the best he can for the future.

Lahti said he is meeting officials of various towns to explain the mission and "demystify" the base, and with school administrators and teachers to help them understand the difficulties children face as they move from base to base. While many in southeastern Connecticut are familiar with the base, Lahti said some employees, sailors and their families live 50 or more miles away.

In these meetings, Lahti said he also stresses how seriously the Navy is taking the problem of military sexual assault.

"I'd like to become more transparent with what we do here. There are certain things that are classified that I can't talk about, but there are a lot of things that are not," he said. "I want people in the local community to understand what the submarine base does, how it contributes to our national security and what people who live in the local community do when they come to work."

In a few years' time, Lahti said he hopes the base will be more energy efficient, have a more reliable power supply, and be well-positioned for the future.

He said, "We're just going to continue with our sustained effort to make the base the best possible submarine base in the world for the next 100 years."

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