

# griffiss business and TECHNOLOGY PARK

By Rob Duchow



*The entrance to Griffiss Business and Technology Park.*

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eleven years ago, Griffiss Business and Technology Park in Rome, N.Y., consisted of a lot of real estate and a four-inch-thick plan.

The former Griffiss Air Force Base sat as a mostly-abandoned military installation. Sure, about 1,700 people went to work there each day, nearly all still employed by the military in one function or another. But the lifeblood of the base – the heavy aircraft which had flown over

Central New York for decades, with deployments to Southeast Asia, the Arabian Gulf and other hot spots around the world – was gone. Gone, too, were more than 4,500 military personnel and civilian employees who just two years earlier had worked at the base, and 750 families who had lived there, making it a center of activity around the clock.

Steven J. DiMeo had been hired two years earlier, just weeks after the Base Realignment and Closure Commission made its final recommendation to realign Griffiss. His job was to oversee redevelopment of the land the Air Force would abandon – essentially to put together a redevelopment plan and then execute it. By the time Griffiss Air Force Base was realigned – officially it was not a closure because some military units remained, even though it was no longer an operating base – the plan was in place.

Today, Griffiss Business and Technology Park is a vibrant center for public and private enterprise in Rome, N.Y., in the heart of the Mohawk Valley. Nearly 5,000 people go to work at the park each day for some 60 employers. Hundreds more jobs have been announced and are on the way. The loss of 1,191 civilian jobs at Griffiss when the Air Force left have been more than replaced, and the worker population is steadily approaching the approximately 6,400 it was when the Griffiss realignment was announced in 1993. Along with the jobs has come significant investment – more than \$265 million in public and private funds have been devoted to infrastructure improvements, construction of new buildings, and demolition of obsolete Air Force facilities to make way for new development since 1995. Griffiss is home to a heavy maintenance aviation company, high-tech information

## SUCCESSFUL REDEVELOPMENT OF A MILITARY INSTALLATION SUPPORTS A NEW REGIONAL VISION

*In 1993, residents of Rome, New York, fought to keep open Griffiss Air Force Base, the community's largest employer for a half century. They lost, but immediately started planning what to do with the 3,500-acre white elephant they would inherit from Uncle Sam. Today, 5,000 people work at the thriving Griffiss Business and Technology Park, and the base redevelopment has twice been named "Developer of the Year" by its peers. The former "city within a city" is no longer an enclave separated from the city around it, but is an integrated part of the community, and new industrial development at Griffiss is leading a regional economic revival.*

technology firms, aerospace and equipment manufacturers, human services providers, a distribution center, commercial uses such as banking and medical offices, and much more.

By most accounts, redevelopment of Griffiss has been a success. In 2000 and 2004 the work at Griffiss earned the Developer of the Year award from the National Association of Installation Developers, now called the Association of Defense

priority, and their funding made the redevelopment at Griffiss affordable to the local community.

As indicated by the term realignment, the Air Force wasn't giving up all of the property at Griffiss. The realignment called for Griffiss to lose its host flying mission, the 416<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, and a support unit, the 485<sup>th</sup> Engineering Installation Group. Another unit, Rome Laboratory, was left in place in a "cantonment" area, as was the Northeast Air Defense Sector, which as part of the realignment was transferred from the Air Force to the New York State Air National Guard. In addition, the airfield – which occupied about half of the



Communities; it is the only two-time winner. Visitors to the property no longer ask what the vision is for the property – they see it unfolding before their eyes as they look around the park – and they no longer comment that it looks like a closed Air Force Base. The removal of guard houses, incorporation of new signs, repainting of drab yellow buildings, and other aesthetic and structural changes give Griffiss Park the feel of being an integral part of the region.

While successful, the redevelopment at Griffiss is also a work in progress. A good portion of the land is still owned by the Air Force, including some which is occupied by private sector tenants. Hundreds of acres are still available for development. The middle mile of a three-mile, four-lane state highway through the park, originally planned for construction in 2002-03, may still be years from completion. Airmen's dormitories remain unused. But these issues are not holding back development, and will be worked through in coming years

### DEVELOPING A MASTER PLAN FOR REUSE

Griffiss Air Force Base was more than 3,500 acres – about six square miles – and there was infrastructure such as roads, water, sewer and electric lines already in place, providing a jump start to redeveloping the property. Also in place were many buildings and a 2.23-mile-long runway with a plethora of viable re-use options. If the property being given up was farmland, it simply would have been returned to nature. But it was a fully developed city within a city in need of a well thought out reuse plan which rationalized infrastructure and road systems for public ownership, and identified ways to leverage remaining assets for new economic development opportunities for the Mohawk Valley. This work required significant capital; the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) and New York State made the redevelopment of former military installations a key economic development

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base acreage – was kept open, to be operated by the New York State Air National Guard, to support deployment of troops from the Army's Fort Drum, about 60 miles away.

In 1994, Griffiss was one of several closed or closing military installations selected to receive a Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) center, to help ameliorate the economic impact of the base closing. This provided a user for a major facility along with jobs and a welcome early boost to the redevelopment effort. As a result of the 2005 BRAC round, the Rome DFAS office is expanding from 380 to 1,000 jobs.

The effort to redevelop the approximately 1,500 acres of Griffiss which the Air Force would relinquish began almost immediately in 1993. Oneida County and the city of Rome formed the Griffiss Redevelopment Planning Council, and DiMeo, then commissioner of urban and economic development for the nearby city of Utica, was hired to run it. He hired a planner, Mark W. Reynolds, along with a communications person and an office manager.

With funding from the Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment, top-caliber consultants were hired to help put together a master plan to redevelop Griffiss Air Force Base into Griffiss Business and Technology Park. The process

took nearly a year and included a series of community meetings and public hearings in 1994. With the far-reaching impact of Griffiss Air Force Base well-known, public consensus on the master plan for redevelopment was sought. Input was solicited from a wide assortment of elected officials, public planners, community leaders, and the public to gain a breadth of opinions. City and county planners were included in the master plan creation to ensure development plans were consistent with the surroundings. With multiple hearings in various locations around the area and a well-advertised period for public comment, anyone with a suggestion was afforded the opportunity to be heard.

The result was a master plan which had widespread public support and allowed for multiple uses in various areas of Griffiss. Seven distinct development districts were established in the master plan, each allowing specific uses such as residential, educational enterprises, office buildings, high-tech research, heavy industry, aviation, and public recreation. The development districts discussed in the master plan later became part of the city of Rome zoning code, and development at Griffiss has followed this zoning since.

### RETAINED MILITARY PROPERTY

The fact that Griffiss was a realignment raised issues and challenges which would not have existed if the base was fully closed.

The military's continued operation of the airfield meant Griffiss' most dominant physical feature, and perhaps the most attractive feature to some potential users, was essentially off limits. The Air Force was amenable to a joint use with the private sector, as long as it retained the right to close the airfield to others for any reason at any time. This condition made a joint use unfeasible.

The idea of a cantonment area was ill-defined by the Air Force. It was stated during the BRAC hearings that by leaving behind the lab – a center of Air Force research in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) – the community had an anchor around which it could build not just a re-use plan for the property, but a recovery plan for the region's economy. At the time, the lab employed

about 900 people, with about 500 contractors working on site. The 1,400 jobs were high-paying, and the brain power of engineers and scientists with advanced degrees provided the region with a jumpstart on building a knowledge-based economy. In fact, the spin off of technologies and creation of companies through the years had already resulted in such a cluster in the Mohawk Valley.

Other challenges were more typical to base redevelopment – gathering public input, reaching consensus on the best use of property, convincing local government to participate in the upkeep of what for 50 years was “not their problem,” learning the ins and outs of bureaucracy connected to base closings, and other typical tasks. The most significant challenge to redevelopment, however, came in 1995 when the Pentagon proposed closing Rome Lab, before the 1993 realignment was even complete.

“In 1995, they came back to shut down the whole place, to finish the job they started in 1993,” according to DiMeo.

In unison, community leaders cried foul. “They told us to build a redevelopment plan around the lab, and we did. Then before the plan could even be implemented, they tried to jerk it out from under us,” DiMeo said. The community fought the recommendation and won, as the BRAC Commission reversed the Pentagon's proposal, and the lab remained at Rome to become the lynchpin and centerpiece for future high tech private sector development at Griffiss and throughout the Mohawk Valley. Today Griffiss Park is the center of a growing regional niche of key technology companies which are leveraging the capability of the Air Force Research Laboratory Rome Research Site, as Rome Laboratory was renamed in 1997.

The 1995 BRAC also built a new runway at Fort Drum, closing the Griffiss Airfield and making it available for private development, effective September 30, 1998.

### COMMUNITY ISSUES

Like most military installations, Griffiss was a city within a city. Many airmen never had to leave the base. Of course they worked there. But they



*Goodrich Corporation opened this 110,000-square-foot plant at Griffiss Park in 2002. It is built on property where Griffiss Local Development Corporation razed some 700,000 square feet of “temporary” former Air Force depot buildings, to prepare the site for new development.*



also lived, shopped, and bought gas on base, went to church, the movies and bowling on base, and ate at restaurants there, too. They could even go golfing and camping on base. If they had children, their kids went to school in the city of Rome public schools, but when they got home they could play ball in their own Little League on base. Adult recreational sports leagues thrived on base as well. This city within a city existed for some 50 years, during which time most of the residents of Rome did not have access to Griffiss.

When the time came to develop a plan to reuse the buildings and property, several questions and suggestions naturally arose. Some people thought buildings should be used for the same purpose for which the Air Force used them. For example, the officers' club could become a restaurant, the movie theater could remain a movie theater, the hospital could become a hospital, and the homes could be used for housing. In some instances, this happened. The golf course is leased to a private sector company and operated as a public golf course. The

The housing was an especially polarizing issue in the public. One school of thought said the housing – despite being built by the Air Force and not meeting local building or fire codes – should be sold or rented, particularly to low-income residents who were already living in sub-standard housing in worse condition. Another opinion said that the exodus of Air Force jobs and people left a glut in both the home-buying and rental markets in Rome, and adding the Air Force housing developments

### Griffiss History

Construction of the Rome Army Air Depot began February 1, 1942, less than eight weeks after the United States entered World War II. In the late 1940s, the facility was renamed Griffiss Air Force Base, in honor of Townsend Griffiss, the first American Airman to die in the European Theater during World War II. In the late 1950s, a new 11,820-foot runway was constructed to accommodate B-52s and other large military aircraft.

A major realignment of Griffiss Air Force Base essentially closed the facility September 30, 1995, when the 416th Bomb Wing and 485th Engineering Installation Group were deactivated, based on a decision made by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission in 1993. The military discontinued operating the Griffiss Airfield on September 30, 1998, based on a decision made by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission in 1995.



*An Atlas Air Boeing 747 is pulled into Empire Aero Center's hangar at Griffiss Business and Technology Park on January 19, 2004. It was the first 747 to arrive at Empire's new facility for maintenance. In the right corner of the hangar is a Capital Cargo International Boeing 737, giving some magnitude of the size of the hangar bay. The hangar, which includes this bay, one just like it, and a third a little smaller along with shop space (a total of about 375,000 square feet) under went a \$17 million renovation and expansion to accommodate Empire Aero Center's move to Griffiss Park from Miami, Florida. Empire is a third party aviation maintenance repair and overhaul facility.*

day care center is leased and operated as a day care center. The base hospital is now a Veterans Administration outpatient clinic. And the vehicle maintenance facility is now used by a bus company to maintain its fleet. But other buildings found brand new uses: the former officers' club is now a medical center; the commissary is now a printing and fulfillment center; the shoppette has become office space; the bowling alley is a vehicle maintenance garage; and the former base chapel is now the cafeteria of the local public high school, a \$44 million investment which opened in 2002. Alas, the movie theater was torn down.

to the mix would only exacerbate an already bad situation. In the end, the master plan recommended a compromise. One housing area of 460 units at the front entrance to Griffiss would be demolished to make way for new business development, while a second housing area comprised of 270 units located outside the base's perimeter would remain residential.

### HOW TO USE BUILDINGS

Debate also took place on what to do with the 4 million square feet of excess buildings. The fact was, most were not usable for economic development purposes and would require significant investment to occupy for commercial uses. Yes, someone could have used them for something, but it would not necessarily have added to the regional

economy. Thus, the master plan called for demolition of many buildings. More than 2 million square feet of space has been torn down, including more than 700,000 square feet of “T” depot buildings constructed during World War II; the “T” was for temporary – yet the wooden structures stood for more than 50 years!

By the time the Bomb Wing went away in the fall of 1995, DiMeo, Reynolds and the team at the Griffiss Redevelopment Planning Council – by then reconstituted as the Griffiss Local Development Corporation or GLDC – had been through two



*The new Rome Free Academy, the public high school serving the city of Rome and surrounding areas, opened in the fall of 2002. The 320,000-square-foot, \$44 million facility was designed to accommodate 2,200 students in grades 9 through 12. Visible at the top of the photo is a Veterans Administration Outpatient Clinic, which was previously the Griffiss Air Force Base Hospital.*

years of planning, and were ready to get the redevelopment ball rolling. Implementing the master plan however, did not mean simply filling up real estate with the first interested party.

“Many people thought Griffiss would provide cheap buildings and cheap land for whatever they wanted to do,” said Reynolds, “but we told them no.” The master plan established a zoning map for what could be done where, and the GLDC set as its mission finding the best and highest use for properties, not the quickest and easiest use. This meant many proposals to use particular buildings or parcels, especially in the first few years, never moved forward.

One such proposal was from a group of local residents who were also NASCAR fans. They saw the concrete runway and immediately thought it was a great start to a major NASCAR speedway. But there is more that goes into developing a NASCAR track than land and concrete – two essential ingredients are investors’ money and NASCAR’s backing. This group had neither, and the proposal never gained traction, although the proposal received its share of attention, and most NASCAR fans in the region thought it was a great idea.

## IMPLEMENTATION

While many people hoped for a quick fix to bring in hundreds or thousands of jobs to Griffiss, implementing the master plan was a time-consuming process requiring patience. This is because most of the early work did not involve bringing private investment and jobs to Griffiss, but investing public monies from EDA and New York State to prepare the property for private investment and job growth later. In addition to the demolition of buildings, other issues included:

- Police and fire protection. For half a century, the Air Force had its own police and fire units, and the professionals who protected the surrounding area were not responsible for Griffiss. With the Air Force gone and the area again open to the public, providing these public services had to be negotiated.
- Rationalizing the road network. While the Air Force maintained 59 lane miles of roads, the need to support public usage was much less. Today, Griffiss has an organized network of 18 lane miles of public roads.
- Care of infrastructure. The Air Force was one large customer for the city of Rome municipal water and sewer systems. Once inside the base, the Air Force maintained all of the lines. As the property was redeveloped, parceled off, and tracts sold, a different system was needed. Takeover of the mains was negotiated with the city of Rome, while lines to and from buildings would belong with those buildings, as is done in the rest of the city. This was not as simple as it may seem however, as the Air Force did not always put mains along roads in what would be considered the right of way – instead they were placed in a straight line to get where they needed to go. After all, the Air Force owned everything.
- Likewise, the Air Force owned and operated the electric distribution system and substations at Griffiss, buying wholesale power off the grid. The Air Force also had a steam heat plant which served most of the base. GLDC created a private utility company to serve only Griffiss Park; Griffiss Utility Services Corporation now owns and maintains the steam plant and all of the power lines at Griffiss, and makes use of a similar wholesale power purchase to keep electric costs low to foster growth. In their cantonment areas, the Air Force Research Laboratory and Northeast Air Defense Sector are now customers for steam and electric, and do not have the responsibility to pay for owning, operating, and maintaining these utility systems, or the roads, water lines, and other infrastructure which are now municipally maintained.

## BRINGING IN JOBS

Replacing the jobs lost with the base closing was and is foremost on the minds of most residents in the area. The jobs came slowly. The first private sector tenant to locate at Griffiss was General Electric, which established an equipment testing center in 1995, even before the base was closed. Most of the early businesses to locate at Griffiss were lured by facilities in which GLDC had invested significant monies from state and federal grants to renovate. Just like many projects, as time goes on, success breeds success. As more buildings and property are developed, more businesses want to be at Griffiss. This is seen also in a shift in the last few years to the private sector leading the development investment.

Today, few vacant buildings remain at Griffiss, meaning future development – and most recent development – will be private sector construction of new buildings. In 2005, Family Dollar invested \$64 million in a new distribution center, a local credit union spent \$7 million to build a new office and branch, a local human services agency invested \$7 million in a new campus, a local dentist built a new building, and a local ophthalmologist-turned-developer constructed a third office building for lease. In 2006, one of North America's largest olive oil distributors is constructing a new plant, a local bank is building a new office, the human services agency is expanding and the ophthalmologist-turned-developer will construct a fourth office building.

## MORE THAN JOBS

It is not just the jobs at Griffiss which have had a profound and positive effect on the community. A 78-acre tract was donated by GLDC to the Rome City School District to construct a new public high school. This saved more than \$1 million for local property taxpayers in land acquisition costs. More importantly, like many schools, this new high school is part of the fabric of the community, a meeting place and social center for not just teen-agers but for all ages, as the school facilities accommodate community groups of all kinds.

The opening of Griffiss to the public after 50-plus years of military control has also changed the habits of many people. The state highway has become a popular artery for motorists heading east from Rome, or coming into Rome from the east, thereby changing other patterns.

Griffiss has become a center of community activity and recreation. In addition to the

high school, there is a golf course, soccer fields, softball fields and baseball fields, and runners, walkers, bikers, and rollerbladers use a multi-purpose trail along the new state highway. Griffiss Air Force Base was off-limits to local residents for five decades, but Griffiss Business and Technology Park welcomes all, and provides for many needs as an integrated part of the community.

## FUNDING

While private sector investment is leading new development, public investments helped prime the pump. New York State provided grant funds for infrastructure improvements, and has assisted many businesses with specific projects to expand at Griffiss. The state has also made Griffiss an Empire Zone, which offers attractive tax incentives for companies investing and creating jobs. The federal government, through the EDA, has also provided significant funding. As properties have been sold to the private sector, capital funds have been invested in further improvements.

Rental proceeds from leases to companies provide ongoing operating funds and help leverage further development at Griffiss. This will continue into the future, as property is sold and leased, and more parcels are improved and prepared for sale and lease.

## PARTNERSHIPS

Along the way, several creative partnerships have helped to spur development efforts at Griffiss.



An aerial view of the 907,000-square-foot Family Dollar Distribution Center. This photo was taken November 1, 2005, as construction was winding down.



The Family Dollar Distribution Center began shipping product to some 500 stores in the Northeast in April 2006. Dozens of trailers are staged shipping in the parking lot of the massive warehouse.




It was recognized early on that the remaining Air Force function, Rome Laboratory, would be an anchor for attracting other high tech research and development activities to Griffiss. Thus, in 1995 GLDC spent considerable resources to work with the local community in a successful fight to save the lab from closure by BRAC. Then, GLDC worked with the federal government and New York State for a unique partnership where each committed \$12 million to construct a new facility for the lab. This new building allowed the lab to vacate expensive, older, operationally obsolete space, consolidate its footprint, reduce its operating costs, and produce a savings to federal taxpayers.

This "Rome Partnership" has become a model for how military-state-local partnerships can allow the military to eliminate base operating costs, while communities retain key military missions and the associated economic benefits. In 2005, GLDC again expended significant time and money to successfully fight a Pentagon recommendation to BRAC which would have impacted the Air Force Research Laboratory. GLDC also partnered with New York State Department of Transportation to speed construction of the first phase of the state highway through the park, by paying for the design a year earlier than DOT planned for it.

Unique deals with developers have also spurred development. By trading land for services such as building demolition or road construction, GLDC has been able to secure needed projects and developers have been able to acquire property, without having to secure immediate capital.

### THE MASTER PLAN

The successes at Griffiss all go back to that four-inch-thick master plan, and its faithful execution over the last decade. This means not cutting corners when it would have been easier, following development standards by planting vegetation and placing berms as required, not selling property below market value just because someone had an idea to use a building, and working with the state and local governments to secure funding, cooperation, and buy-in to the vision.

Some people think Griffiss has been more successful in the last few years than in the first several after the Air Force left. Measured by private sector investment and job growth, this would appear to be true. But it was the work going on in those years – not so glamorous things like razing buildings, constructing roads, rationalizing infrastructure, and negotiating municipal agreements – which set the stage for the success now being experienced. Without laying the groundwork, the investments and jobs would not necessarily be coming now. 

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