

Marines put price on Long Beach loss

\$6 million sought for Reserve facility

By Rowan Scarborough
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The Marine Corps is asking Congress for \$6 million to build a home for a Reserve artillery unit kicked out of the former Long Beach naval station so the city could lease the property to Cosco, a Chinese-run ocean shipper.

The displaced unit, the 5th Battalion, 14th Marines, is housed in temporary office trailers at Seal Beach, Calif. It briefly enjoyed more comfortable quarters on a finger of land known as the "mole" at Long Beach, Calif.

The decision to give Cosco, the Chinese Ocean Shipping Co., a commercial beachhead on prime Pacific real estate spurred protest

from conservatives in Congress. They view Cosco as a tool of the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese intelligence service.

The Marine request is the only construction project for the service's 42,000-person Reserve in the fiscal 1998 military construction budget of \$8.4 billion.

Maj. Scott Campbell, a Marine Corps spokesman, said the \$6 million would finance a 10-acre complex of classrooms, operations offices and storage facilities at Seal Beach.

"We have no interest in revisiting the mole possibility at Long Beach," he said.

A permanent home would end the 5th Battalion's three-year odyssey, prompted by Mother Nature

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and local politics.

The unit was sent packing by the 1994 Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles. It quickly found a home at Long Beach on the man-made peninsula known as the mole.

Over the next two years, the Marine Reserve, with headquarters in New Orleans, petitioned the Navy to let the unit remain after

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the station closed, as ordered by an independent base-closure commission in Washington.

The Corps argued it was a separate federal agency and had first claim on part of the property under the base-closure law. Supporters also said there were precedents for creating enclaves for continued military use of a closed base.

But Long Beach was wooing Cosco to sign a lease and viewed a Marine Corps presence as a deal killer. The Navy, which still owns the 145-acre site, turned down the Marines' petition.

"The Navy frankly didn't want to make that available to us because they were trying to fully dispose of the property to turn it over to the city," said retired Maj. Gen. James E. Livingston, who commanded the Marine Reserve during the confrontation.

"It seemed to be a little shameful that we couldn't stay there," he said in a recent interview. "It gave us a great place to recruit from, and we were already in the facility."

Since the 5th Battalion's ordeal

was first disclosed in March by The Washington Times, the Cosco transfer has hit roadblocks.

A Los Angeles judge ordered the Long Beach port commission to terminate the lease and conduct an environmental-impact study. His order came in a suit brought by preservationists who want to rescue the base's bird-nesting sanctuaries.

Rep. Duncan Hunter, California Republican, said yesterday he is withholding judgment on whether the Marines got a fair deal until he hears their case for the \$6 million.

Mr. Hunter, a member of the House National Security Committee, is co-sponsoring a bill that would block Cosco's Long Beach lease. He has received a series of classified briefings on whether Cosco represents a threat to national security.

"Every time I get a briefing, we find new reasons not to give them this naval base," he said.

He said he received a closed-door FBI briefing last week on Chinese espionage operations.

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