Tinker Stealth Project Backed

By Ed Kelley
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WASHINGTON — A House panel Wednesday approved authorization of $31.8 million next year to buy land and begin construction at Tinker Air Force Base for the Stealth bomber program.

The amount matches the figure requested by President Reagan in his final budget blueprint sent to Congress last January for Tinker, which is to provide maintenance and logistical support for the bombers.

Additionally, the Armed Services subcommittee on military installations and facilities authorized nearly $100 million in other construction projects at Oklahoma bases for fiscal year 1990, which begins Oct. 1. Included is $21.5 million for a Navy squadron of E-6A planes at Tinker.

Rep. Dave McCurdy, a panel member who made the announcement, said the $330 million that was approved for Oklahoma represents nearly a 40 percent increase over funds appropriated this year. Such an authorization "demonstrates the commitment" to Oklahoma military installations, said McCurdy, D-Norman.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Don Nickles, R-Ponca City, said a similar authorization request on the Stealth program will be made in the Senate next month.

If authorization is approved in both House and Senate, the two appropriations committees would make recommendations for funding levels.

The subcommittee's action Wednesday on the Stealth, or B-2, came a day after Defense Secretary Richard Cheney said he might make public revelations about the highly secret program in order to win support on Capitol Hill.

Cheney said he approached the Stealth "with a healthy degree of skepticism" when he became secretary earlier this year. But after review of the program, Cheney said he was persuaded the bomber has such a "very significant capability" that "it's very important we proceed" with its deployment.

The Pentagon has spent $20 billion on the program, even though none of the planes — expected to cost more than $500 million each — have flown. Their purpose is to evade detection by radar.

Cheney earlier proposed cutting $1 billion from the Stealth program in 1990, which would push production back a year. However, the Air Force wants to proceed in order that construction can begin in 1990, officials said.

Details of the $31.8 million authorized Wednesday as presented by McCurdy include funding requests of:

- $17 million for a support facility at Tinker, which would include special fire protection.
- $3.86 million to buy avionics, as well as 20 acres of land.
- $5.2 million for a storage facility, where equipment used to support B-2 weaponry would be housed.

Besides the Stealth, Tinker also would receive $21.5 million for the E-6A squadron if funding is approved.

After months of controversy, Congress last September approved release of nearly $50 million for the E-6A squadron's home at Tinker. The first of the 16 jets expected to be housed there are to arrive by August 1990.

Lawmakers have said the squadron-basing facilities are expected to provide 1,600 jobs and $200 million to the Oklahoma City area economy.

Tinker also would receive, if funding occurs, $3.45 million for a supply warehouse for the AWACS program; $2 million for a radar software facility for the Stealth's predecessor, the B-1B; and $1.7 million to make changes at an industrial waste treatment plant at the base.