San Manuel Tribe and Norton Air Force Base Museum to Preserve Portions of Airport’s Cold War Legacy

The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians is committed to help preserve the rich legacy and heritage of Norton Air Force Base. Though a collaborative effort, it is transferring exterior branch insignias and portions of a concrete wall from the former Air Combat Camera Services building to the Norton Air Force Base Museum, commemorating the region’s role and significance in Cold War defense programs.

As part of the 1988 military base closure process, the U.S. Air Force and Inland Valley Development Agency facilitated the transfer of facilities and adjacent land that had previously supported the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) Facility to the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. This reinforced concrete building was originally built to house the largest computer ever assembled and was part of a larger U.S. Air Force Early Warning System to detect and manage potential threats from the former Soviet Union.

The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians is in the process of demolishing the aging structure and 13 smaller buildings on an 18-acre parcel on the former base, which is now the San Bernardino International Airport. In 2005, this portion of Serrano ancestral land was returned to the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians by the federal government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“We couldn’t be happier that the Norton Air Force Base Museum will ensure that these historic facilities and the role they played in our country’s defense will forever be enshrined for the education of future generations,” said Lynn Valbuena, Chairwoman of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. “The SAGE facility was one of the most important components of our air defense, and it was important
to us that a physical representation of the building could remain at the museum.”

The tribe’s long-term goal is to develop this parcel and adjacent land into a job-generating commercial property. It is part of a comprehensive, continuing plan under the direction of the Inland Valley Develop Agency (IVDA) to transform the former airbase into a vibrant airport and logistics hub.

“This is a significant milestone in achieving the base reuse plan as well as our collective vision for the region,” commented San Bernardino County Supervisor and Co-Chairperson of the IVDA, Josie Gonzales. “The IVDA is proud to join in support of this important project in partnership with San Manuel and the Norton Air Force Base Museum.”

“Since the closure of the base in 1994, San Manuel has been at the table with other governmental entities trying to map out what this region will look like in 10 and 20 years,” said Valbuena. “As a recognized tribal government with a historical stake in the region, we have worked closely with the IVDA to not only plan for the future, but preserve and honor the legacy of air men and women, whose work was and continues to be an invaluable safeguard for our country.”

San Manuel has hired environmental and construction companies who will work in concert with local cities and agencies as the structures are removed. Demolition is expected to last eight months. The Norton Air Force Base Museum is poised to accept these new features for display at the museum very soon.

“The Norton Air Force Base Museum is proud to support the great men and women who served and continue to serve, and appreciates the continuing commitment of San Manuel, the Inland Valley Development Agency, and our veterans throughout the world,” said Bob Edwards, President of the Norton Air Force Base Museum.

For more information about the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, visit www.sanmanuel-nsn.gov.