

WASHINGTON -- Nebraska lawmakers continue to press Air Force officials for information about why Offutt Air Force Base is losing out on a major new command despite receiving the highest score in an evaluation process.

Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., and Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., have written to Air Force Secretary Michael Donley seeking further explanation for the decision to name Barksdale Air Force Base near Shreveport, La., as the preferred spot for the new Global Strike Command. That command will oversee the Air Force's nuclear operations.

The senators' letter requests copies of e-mails, faxes and other internal communications related to the decision, as well as communications with community leaders and Nebraska's congressional delegation.

Johanns says he hasn't gotten a good explanation of how Offutt could "do everything, score the highest and still end up losing."

"I don't get that at all, so we'll keep digging until we can get a good answer to that," he said.

Offutt and five other bases were evaluated on six criteria, including mission synergy. Offutt scored the highest in that category, which was weighted as the most important, and finished with the highest overall score.

In responding to previous inquiries from members of Nebraska's congressional delegation, Donley wrote that those who scored the bases from Air Combat Command saw great benefit in placing the new command with U.S. Strategic Command, which is based at Offutt.

Donley wrote, however, that officials at Air Force headquarters disagreed with that and saw greater mission synergy in locating the new command with the subordinate nuclear units and infrastructure at Barksdale.

Donley also noted the "important strategic rationale" of having the two major nuclear commands placed at different bases in case of attack.

But Johanns says that was never made clear at the start of the process.

"It feels to me like they're searching for a reason not to give this to Offutt," he said.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., also had written to Donley and received a similar response. Nelson spokesman Jake Thompson said Tuesday that Nelson is in "ongoing discussions" with Donley over the matter.

Losing the command was a blow to community and business leaders, who had lobbied for it

and the many jobs and economic development that it would bring.

"We really haven't gotten a full answer yet," said Terry. "We want to know from the communications, who was really behind the change here and was Barksdale .a.a. the chosen one before they even went through the fake process?"

