

OMAHA, Neb. -- Air Force officials are preparing a list of finalists for the headquarters base of a new but already downsized unit.

Nebraska officials say Offutt Air Force Base, near Omaha in suburban Bellevue, remains in the running, but Pentagon officials haven't released their working list.

The new unit was to be a separate, major unit called Air Force Cyberspace Command. Its mission: coordinate computer network defense and offensive attacks on enemy networks.

But the Air Force has downgraded the scope of the unit and placed it under the Air Force Space Command.

That reduced the size of the economic plum worth millions and eagerly sought by Offutt's civilian neighbors.

The major command could have warranted a headquarters of about 500 military personnel. But an Air Force spokeswoman said the newly designated 24th Air Force will likely have about 300 personnel at its headquarters.

On Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman Ed Gulick said the base and community finalists for the new headquarters won't be announced until next year, followed much later in the year by the selection. "We're still looking for a home," Gulick said as he lamented the delays.

The Air Force had hoped to make a decision by the end of 2007. That was pushed to February this year, then March.

Then in October, the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Norton Schwartz, announced that the cybercommand would instead become a component of the Air Force Space Command.

Spokeswoman Carla Pampe, who is with the cybercommand's provisional headquarters at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, said Schwartz wanted to focus on rebuilding the public trust in how the Air Force handled its nuclear weapons.

These two major blunders focused his concern: the mistaken shipment to Taiwan of four electrical fuses for missile warheads, and the flight of a B-52 bomber that was mistakenly armed with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and flown from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., to Barksdale. At the time, the pilot and crew didn't know they had nuclear arms aboard.

Schwartz has said Pentagon officials believe that lumping the responsibility for space, cyber and nuclear issues would be too much for one command, so the Air Force was shifting its nuclear-capable bombers, missiles and staff into a new, separate Global Strike Command.

Downsizing the fledgling cybercommand forced another review of the unit requirements. Schwartz said in October that planners must compare the new requirements against Air Force staffing and the proposals and presentations made by the bases and their community backers.

"Right now what we're working on is finalizing the roadmap for how the 24th will be structured," Pampe said. "We hope to have that released by February."

Including Offutt, bases reported to be in the running are Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss.; Langley in Hampton, Va.; and Peterson in Colorado Springs, Colo.; and Barksdale, which is near Bossier, La.

Nebraska Rep. Lee Terry, whose 2nd Congressional District includes Omaha and most of its suburbs, was part of the local presentation to Air Force officials at the Pentagon last summer. His spokeswoman said Wednesday that he had been kept abreast of the changes and

remained certain that the new unit would be a good fit at Offutt.

Offutt is already home to major U.S. Air Force units and to the U.S. Strategic Command, which includes members from all of the services.

As part of the Offutt community's effort, the Omaha Development Foundation bought 135 acres just south of the Bellevue base for \$777,500 _ extra space the Air Force could find useful.

