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JSF hub for Williamtown could fly

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The Joint Strike Fighter

WILLIAMTOWN could become a maintenance hub for F-35 Joint Strike Fighters if Hunter industry unites and “does the legwork”, a defence summit has been told.

Newcastle MP Tim Owen made the comment yesterday at the Hunter Defence Forum at the Honeysuckle headquarters of peak manufacturing body HunterNet.

The forum was attended by key defence, business and manufacturing players and also addressed by Lieutenant-General Ken Gillespie, the former chief of army who is now defence adviser to the state government.

Mr Owen said he had met with US defence officials on Monday who were optimistic about the progress of the country’s JSF program, with the federal government expected to reveal its acquisition plans early next year in its defence white paper.

“If we play our cards right, and we collaborate and do the legwork, we will be able to come to the table with a competitive, well-structured bid for the deeper maintenance of that aircraft,” he said.

Mr Owen said there would “hopefully” be an opportunity for Williamstown to be a maintenance facility for the aircraft, which could bring “billions and billions of dollars” to the Hunter.

Lieutenant-General Gillespie told the forum that while the JSF progression was good news, the unknown factor remained how many aircraft the federal government could afford to buy.

Two weeks after Hunter shipbuilder and defence contractor Forgacs warned it would be forced to lay off up to 900 staff if the federal government did not make a commitment on future naval projects, Lieutenant-General Gillespie said a round-table discussion between the states was needed to address the industry’s woes.

“The federal government has to decide whether for strategic purposes, for self-sufficiency and a future with defence and security issues, do we want a home-grown shipbuilding industry,” he said. “And if we do, we have to do something to make sure that it firstly survives and secondly, that it can run economically over time.”