

BRAC UPDATE: Area companies, organizations pack for one last info fair at Fort Knox

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The first couple of information fairs held by Columbus-area businesses and organizations at Fort Knox, Ky., weren't exactly huge attractions, recalls Linda Brady, who missed the initial one in 2008 but attended the second in 2009.

"There were maybe 300 people who attended and it wasn't that robust," Brady, regional relocation director for the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, said of the one she worked two years ago.

"It was too early. Nobody knew whether they were going to get assigned to Fort Benning or not," she said.

The atmosphere and turnout changed dramatically, however, last April when local business people, educational institutions and church representatives visited the post that is in the process of relinquishing its U.S. Army Armor School and Center to Fort Benning.

"There were like 1,600 people that attended," Brady said. "It was wall-to-wall people, and they walked in there like sponges."

The difference a year ago? The soldiers were finally receiving orders that they would be headed to Fort Benning and not some other military installation. Civilian employees at the Kentucky post were also being told to make a decision on whether or not they wished to relocate south and become part of the new Maneuver Center of Excellence, which combines the infantry and armor and is federally mandated to be fully operational by Sept. 15 of this year.

With that deadline fast approaching, the chamber has coordinated one last information fair, which will take place Thursday at the Leaders Club at Fort Knox.

More than 300 people from the Columbus-area business sector and a wide variety of other organizations, along with Fort Benning agencies, are making the 500-mile journey north again, staffing 85 booths.

Several real-estate firms will be there, Brady said, as well as names such as Callaway Gardens, St. Anne Catholic Church, Pacelli High School, Wynnbrook Baptist Church, Columbus Technical College, Columbus State University, Troy University, the Muscogee County School District and the Phenix City School System.

They all will be looking to capture a portion of the influx of military and civilian employees and family members moving to Fort Benning. Brady said she understands at least 800 soldiers have yet to move here, as well as some civilian workers.

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Note that doesn't include troops who are transferring from other installations around the world to staff the Maneuver Center. In all, Fort Benning is expected to pick up 28,000 soldiers, civilian staffers and family members as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure process.

The information fair, Brady said, serves the purpose of introducing all of those people to the products, services, educational, work force and quality of life offerings in the Chattahoochee Valley area.

One company looking to boost its business during the trip is Opelika, Ala.-based Lambert Transfer and Storage, a North American Van Lines agent that also has an office in Columbus.

Lambert is going as far as to transport vendor supplies and booth materials from Columbus to Fort Knox free of charge, with the effort dubbed "Pack for BRAC" by the chamber. The supplies are being loaded today at the chamber.

"We're already doing some short-term storage for some of them as they come in and until their homes are ready or they get new homes," Craig Yancey, a sales representative for Lambert, said of those moving from Fort Knox.

But the moving company wants to take its business a step further, attending the information fair and volunteering its services for a couple of reasons.

"Number one, it's to get to know the Columbus people better so that hopefully, in the future, if somebody were to ask a real-estate agent, 'Oh, by the way, who's a good mover,' it would put us first on their mind," Yancey said.

"Number two, I'm trying to make contact with the civilian defense people up in that area. Hopefully, they will give us the opportunity to move their people from Fort Knox to here."