

# BRAC growth is ‘full-steam ahead’

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By TONY ADAMS

Ever since the announcement in 2005 that Fort Benning’s employment sector would be expanding significantly because of the Base Realignment and Closure process, there has been skepticism that the jobs would actually materialize.

That looks to change soon, with the military installation on Columbus’ south side gearing up to add as many as 1,600 civilian jobs by September 2011. That’s when the U.S. Armor School at Fort Knox, Ky., is mandated to be fully in place at Fort Benning, partnering with the U.S. Infantry School to become the Maneuver Center of Excellence.

“While we’ve had a trickle (of jobs) so far, all indications are, based on the completion of these projects out here, that it’s going to be full-steam ahead in the next two or three quarters,” said Blanche Robinson, director of Fort Benning’s Civilian Personnel Advisory Center.

There are now about 3,000 civilian employees on post supporting the main garrison and its medical and training facilities. As the Maneuver Center becomes fully functional and other activities on post grow, the civilian work force should swell to between 4,500 and 4,600, Robinson said.

“Because we are growing the Maneuver Center of Excellence, of course all of the supporting activities out here that provide some type of service — in order for that service not to be degraded — they’re going to have to bolster their numbers as well,” she said.

The areas that will see much of the job growth, she said, include emergency services — security, police and fire protection — along with medical operations. Fort Benning plans to replace its aging Martin Army Community Hospital with a larger facility in the coming years.

The Maneuver Center of Excellence itself is still a work in progress. Construction continues on the U.S. Armor School training facilities, with a handful of advance party soldiers and civilians already having arrived, said Bridgett Siter, spokeswoman for the MCOE. Another 30 personnel are expected to arrive this summer and early fall.

“Personnel will begin arriving later this fall with the largest waves in spring through summer of 2011,” said Siter.

The MCOE’s own estimates show the post’s civilian work force possibly topping 4,900 by October 2011.

On the uniformed side, there are now about 15,700 permanent-party soldiers on Fort Benning now. That should jump to about 20,400 when everything is in place, Siter said.

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Robinson said there already have been roughly 100 civilian hires made due to growth on post. There also were 220 staffers from Fort Knox who committed to make the move south to Fort Benning at some point over the next 18 months, she said. But the number of transfers here could drop if people change their minds.

Though Fort Knox itself is losing the Armor School, the Kentucky post is gaining the U.S. Army Civilian Personnel Center. That installation should gain 5,000 jobs when the dust settles.

“In all likelihood a lot of the people that initially indicated they were coming here, some of them are going to find jobs in the interim,” Robinson said.

That, in essence, should leave more jobs available for area residents needing a paycheck with the city’s unemployment rate jumping above 10 percent in February.

Robinson advises anyone interested in landing work with Fort Benning to visit the official U.S. Army website, Civilian Personnel Online, post a resume and check back often as jobs are announced in the coming months.

“We’re posting jobs on a daily basis, so if someone is interested, they need to be going out there looking every two to three days,” said Robinson, who acknowledged her own staff is in the process of increasing from 34 to 46 positions to handle the additional workload.

“We’re doing well,” she said. “We’re getting the applicant and the referral lists out there timely. It’s so far so good. But they’re going to turn up the volume in just a little bit.”

That higher decibel of hiring is already in full swing on the civilian contracting side, said Gary Jones, executive vice president of Economic Development and Military Affairs with the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce. About 2,000 civilians are now working to construct the Armor School and basic training facilities on the post. More than \$2 million a day is being spent there by the federal government, Jones said. Construction should remain constant on Benning through 2015, he said.

Jones also pointed out that Base Realignment and Closure has several other tentacles aside from relocating the Armor School here.

There is the creation of two new training battalions and the growth in unit sizes here. That includes the relocation of about 600 service members to here from other outposts, such as the European theater.

“You’re basically having your installation grow to support the global war on terrorism, because the military service is at war — your Army, your Navy, your Marines,” Jones said. “There’s growth there on base to make sure you can get the soldiers out and everything else.”

The most dramatic element of the military installation’s expansion can be found in the numbers, Jones said. It will include adding a small city of more than 28,000 residents. That includes 4,700

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soldiers, nearly 1,900 civilian workers, 4,800 contractors and nearly 6,900 spouses and 9,800 children, nearly two-thirds of those school age.

The University of Georgia’s Selig Center for Economic Growth anticipates there will be between 4,000 and 6,000 more jobs created on the local economy because of the military buildup.

“That gets into the restaurants, cars, homes, groceries, clothing, hair appointments, gas stations, the hotel industry and so forth,” Jones said.

Then there’s the really big number — \$5,972,000,000.

That’s the expected annual economic impact of Fort Benning on the region once BRAC is complete. That includes soldier and civilian salaries, and money earned by government contractors.

The impact of the post on the region prior to BRAC was about \$4.32 billion. That’s a \$1.65 billion booster shot for the economy in just five years.