

# Fair introduces 1,000 Fort Knox soldiers to Valley area

**Ledger-Enquirer**

Posted on Fri, Apr. 30, 2010

**BY CHUCK WILLIAMS –**

[chwilliams@ledger-enquirer.com](mailto:chwilliams@ledger-enquirer.com)

<http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2010/04/30/1105888/fair-introduces-1000-fort-knox.html>

FORT KNOX, Ky. — If anyone at Fort Knox was looking for a place in the Chattahoochee Valley to live, go to school, worship, or play golf, Thursday was the day to find it.

More than 162 schools, municipalities, counties, businesses and groups from the Chattahoochee Valley participated in an information fair for Fort Knox soldiers, civilian workers and family members preparing to move to Fort Benning over the next 18 months as part of Base Realignment and Closure.

The latest U.S. Army numbers indicate 28,000 new people will be moving into the Chattahoochee Valley by September 2011. That includes more than 11,400 service members, government civilian workers and defense contractors. The rest are spouses and children.

Columbus real estate agent Kim Freeman with Waddell Realty was one of the more than 200 Columbus representatives packed into the Leaders Club.

“Now, you can feel it is real, rather than being told it’s real,” Freeman said.

The BRAC process started five years ago, and since then Columbus residents have waited for the push of the tanks and big guns out of Kentucky as the number of troops and family coming to the region have been and continue to be a moving target.

“We’re on the way,” said Lt. Col. Larry Reeves, who commands the 2nd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment. “And you will know when we get there.”

The Columbus business people in the room Thursday will be coming home with stories and leads from the daylong event. Different people heard different things.

Freeman said many of those talking to her about housing were open-minded.

“Right now, everybody seems open to both sides of the river,” she said. “Most everybody views the region as one community, which is the way you want to see it.”

Columbus real estate broker Rick Gordon was set up at the other end of the room from Freeman. He heard something different.

“I was shocked most of them — nine out of every 10 I talked to — were saying they wanted to live in Alabama,” said Gordon, who is licensed in Georgia and Alabama. “I don’t know where they are getting that word from. Most of the guys we are talking to don’t know anything about the area, but the first thing out of their mouth is, ‘Are y’all in Alabama?’”

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W.C Bradley Co. Real Estate agent Wes Driver zoned in on why there is so much interest in living in Alabama.

“Alabama has done a good job of selling itself up here,” he said. “And one of the things they are using is there is no income tax on military retirement and there is in Georgia.”

Peggy Martin, chairperson of the Russell County Commission and a former Phenix City mayor, heard people talking about Alabama all day. She attributes it to two things.

“People are coming up and telling us their friends are telling them to move to Alabama,” Martin said. “One of the specific reasons is that gate (to Fort Benning) on the Alabama side.”

Columbus developer John Flournoy, president of the Flournoy Development Co., said the fact that people are looking into Alabama is healthy for the region.

“The systems in Columbus are going to be stretched if you try and jam all of the people in,” Flournoy said.

But there is plenty happening in Columbus as a result of BRAC, Flournoy said. He pointed out that his company, which has been building apartment complexes primarily in Texas, Oklahoma and Tennessee the last five years, is looking again at Muscogee County. Flournoy Development is planning a new complex in North Columbus, he said.

This was the seventh time such a fair has been held at Fort Knox. It was arranged by the Army and sponsored by the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce and The Valley Partnership, a regional economic development agency.

Rick Jacobson of Maple Ridge Golf Club has been here before, but this time was different. He pointed to a list of 15 names of people who wanted to get on the newsletter e-mail list and were interested in more information. He collected the names in an hour.

“That’s more than I got in two full days from previous trips,” Jacobson said.

Lt. Col. Chris Willis and wife, Jill, were among the more than 1,000 people from Fort Knox who participated in the information fest. Willis, nine active duty soldiers and three civilians will be among the first to report to Fort Benning in November.

Willis was at Fort Benning two weeks ago preparing for the move. He said another fair of this type should be held before the bulk of the troop movement starts in about a year.

“Housing and schools are the biggest concerns,” he said.

About 400 Fort Knox personnel already know they are going to Benning, and that number will increase in the coming months. That is the biggest reason for an additional fair, Willis said.

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Linda C. Brady, who organized the fair for the chamber, said the Army was discussing the possibility of doing another one in the fall.

Fort Benning Garrison Commander Col. Tom MacDonald said the fair was a great benefit for those looking at the move.

“It is an invitation for Columbus, Phenix City and the rest of the Chattahoochee Valley to talk to the folks about what’s in Columbus,” MacDonald said.

For Freeman, the Waddell Realtor, the day had a festive feel. “It feels like I am in Columbus with a lot of Columbus people and soon-to-be Columbus people,” Freeman said.