

Final information fair at Fort Knox gives soldiers and families chance to learn about Columbus and Fort Benning area

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FORT KNOX, Ky. -- Still nearly four months away from moving to Fort Benning and the Columbus area, 1st Lt. Kevin Bergman and his wife, Christina, were among a captive audience here Thursday.

The couple, with 5-month-old Nicholas along for the ride, were among the estimated 1,000-plus soldiers, civilian workers and spouses taking part in the fourth and final information fair at what is called the Leaders Club on post.

They were keenly interested in learning more about the hospitals and quality of life in the Columbus area, along with jobs and the housing market.

“We’re going to rent,” said the Army lieutenant. “We haven’t decided if it’s going to be on post or off post yet, but we’re excited about it. We’ll be down there in the middle of July and we’ll make a decision within the next months.”

A trip is planned to Columbus and Fort Benning within a few weeks to nail down a possible area to reside, Christina said.

“Just from word of mouth through the military people, we’ve heard of different areas to go to and different areas to stay away from,” she said. “A lot of people are going to Phenix (City) and up by Exit 10 in Georgia.”

Linda Brady, a Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce coordinator of the information fair, estimated around lunch Thursday that more than 500 U.S. Armor School troops and civilians connected to it had ventured through the doors. The ranks thinned out in the afternoon, culminating with a final projection of “in excess of 1,000” attendees at the event.

The tank-oriented contingent collectively is headed for Fort Benning this spring and summer as the Armor and Infantry combine to become the U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence.

Spc. Miguel Torrez and wife, Heather, along with Miguel Jr., 17 months old, were among those seeking enlightenment at the fair.

“We’re hoping to get on post,” said the Army specialist, who is headed to Columbus in April. “It’s not a 100-percent guarantee. We’ve been on the waiting list since I got my orders about a month and a half ago. So, hopefully, cross my fingers.”

Lt. Col. Antonio Austin, the rear commander who is tasked with closing down shop at Fort Knox, estimated about 20 percent of the armor troops are already at Fort Benning. More than 1,000 more are scheduled to move to the Georgia installation in waves through this summer,

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with more filling in from other military posts. The Armor School will have about 2,200 personnel, he said.

Representing the community

The information fair also drew more than 300 community, church, college, school and business people from the Columbus and Phenix City area. They were spread among several rooms, with each pitching what they hoped the military people want to hear.

Some had more help than others with their pitches, however, offering everything from \$500 Visa cards to big-screen televisions. Rose Anne Erickson Realty of Columbus had a 50-inch Sanyo TV just itching to land in a soldier's living room.

"We try to give away a big prize, something that actually catches their attention and gets some camaraderie going with them and see if we can actually get them in a house or rental in the (Columbus/Phenix City) area," said Billy Sims, managing broker for the real-estate firm.

"A lot of people are saying they're coming in May or July, and then some of them have orders about the middle of September," Sims said.

Primary Residential Mortgage of Phenix City was among the plethora of homebuilders, loan companies and real-estate companies hoping to garner a slice of the incoming military business. The mortgage company was giving away Visa cards valued between \$500 and \$100, along with a TV and a couple of recliners.

"We've really been focusing on welcoming everybody to the area and giving away some things, discounts and stuff like that," said Brad Clayton, who operates the business with loan officer and wife, Michele Clayton.

And while Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, Ga., just north of Columbus, didn't pony up any large TV screens or big bucks, it was letting military people know they can enjoy the nature preserve at no cost.

"We actually offer free admission to military for active or retired ID," said Jenn Agnew, a marketing manager with Callaway. "It's free admission to them, plus they get to bring up to five guests. It actually turns into a family event for them."

Schools also were on many people's minds. Larry DiChiara, superintendent of Phenix City Public Schools, noted the current estimate says his district will gain about 700 military students due the Base Realignment and Closure process launched in 2005. Lower taxes, and the military's ability to live in Alabama and still be eligible for Georgia's HOPE scholarship could change that, he said.

"I'm telling people it's going to be more than that," DiChiara said. "This past summer we gained 336 (students). We know the vast majority of those are military. So we are seeing more military coming in at a pace faster than what we used to."

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In Columbus, Calvary Christian School's director of finance, Lee Ann Tipton, said the 550-student school off Old Moon Road could be a good fit for some of the military people transferring here and that quite a few have expressed interest.

"There's going to be a certain percentage of the population that's coming to Columbus that's going to be interested in private Christian education," she said. "There's the emphasis on everything for the child, the spiritual and academic. And the small environment, I think, is appealing to a lot of people."

Then there is the matter of jobs. With several thousand spouses accompanying the armor soldiers, Fort Benning's Civilian Advisory Personnel Center was at Knox Thursday letting everyone know what is available and how to land employment.

"We're seeing a lot more spouses this time," said human resources technician Michelle Young. "We have a priority placement program now and it helps the incoming soldiers' spouses. It basically kind of matches them up for positions."

Young said there should be enough jobs to go around for the spouses at Fort Benning, which is good considering the Columbus metro area unemployment rate is still near 10 percent.

"You have people leaving all the time," Young said of the military turnover. "And some of the spouses may not want to work."

But should continuing education -- not an immediate paycheck -- be the preference for the military spouses heading south, schools like Columbus Technical College stand ready to assist them, said recruitment coordinator Ken Lockhart.

"A lot of them are saying they want to take the technical programs and are interested in some of the health-care programs, etc." he said. "Health care is always very, very popular."