

Fort Benning official says tax revenue loss is among the key concerns about expansion

Posted on Thu, Jun. 30, 2011

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Ledger-Enquirer

<http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2011/06/30/1639342/fort-benning-expansion-official.html>

Almost 100 residents responded to the Army's plan to expand Fort Benning training land by 82,800 acres, a post official said Wednesday.

After a draft environmental impact study was released May 13, residents had 45 days or until Monday to make public comments on the report that selected Stewart County as the preferred region to expand training operations. Four other alternatives include locations in Marion, Webster, Harris and Talbot counties in Georgia and Russell County in Alabama.

Residents are concerned about a wide range of issues, including the possible economic impact of losing \$962,332 in tax revenue in Stewart County and keeping land in the family.

"Some said they did not want to sell," said Monica Manganaro, a public affairs spokeswoman on post. "There is a pretty wide range based on the comments we have been getting all along. They are pretty much in line with that."

The comments were received by telephone, certified letters, email and a court reporter available at four public meetings in Richland, Buena Vista and Waverly Hall in Georgia and Russell County in Alabama. The lion's share of those questions voiced concerns about the loss of tax revenue if thousands of acres are removed from the Stewart County tax rolls and controlled by the government.

Ending the comment period gives the Army's staff of real estate, training and environmental specialists a chance to start entering property before the final impact study is completed sometime in September, said George Steuber, deputy garrison commander on post.

"Now we get to go forward and focus our environmental folks, real estate folks and training folks and actually start forward with asking permission to go on people's land to walk their land," Steuber said.

Tim Cadenhead, an Omaha resident who lives off County Road 39, said the Army expansion could stretch toward his property in western Stewart County, the area where officials have identified 97,000 acres from which to select the needed training land.

"They are going to get close," Cadenhead said Wednesday. "I'd rather stay there and them be my neighbor than for me have to leave my place. I know it's going to get a bunch of folks."

If teams start moving into woods and walking the land, Cadenhead has some advice for them.

"They better watch for rattlesnakes," Cadenhead said. "Woods down there are full of them."

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To respond to some comments, Steuber said officials will return to all the counties to take part in town hall meetings.

“We will go back to the counties,” Steuber said. “That is actually a better forum because we can actually present what we have and have perspective answers to questions.”

The usual stop is with the county commissions especially in Richland, the county seat of Stewart County, and in Chattahoochee County.

“We know they are interested and we want to keep them informed,” Steuber said.

All public comments that came in by Monday’s deadline will become part of the official record. They will be added to the final economic impact statement, Manganaro said. “We want them to know their voices will be heard,” she said.

Even though the official comment period is over, residents may continue to send in responses, Manganaro said.

“We will continue to accept comments but they won’t be part of the official comment period,” she said.

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