

Fort Knox families begin search for homes and schools

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FORT KNOX, Ky. — Stacy Gray knew exactly what she was looking for when she walked into a room full of Columbus people pitching schools, housing and the quality of life in the Chattahoochee Valley.

The U.S. Army civil service employee and wife of a staff sergeant will be moving from Kentucky to Columbus in the next year as part of the Base Realignment and Closure process that has been bubbling for five years.

And her top priority is finding a high school for her 14-year-old daughter Bryana.

“I am looking at two places — Columbus High and Brookstone,” Gray said.

How did a mother who has not been to Columbus come to that conclusion?

“I have been doing my research,” she said.

Gray has been making “a bunch of phone calls” to schools in Columbus, as well as looking at test scores on the Internet.

The Grays are just one family in a military wave that will hit Fort Benning and the Chattahoochee Valley in November and not stop rolling until September 2011.

The latest U.S. Army numbers indicate 28,000 new people will be moving into the Chattahoochee Valley over the next 18 months. That includes more than 11,400 service members, government civilian workers and defense contractors. The rest are spouses and children.

The Fort Knox families are armed with information about the Columbus region, said Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce President Mike Gaymon.

“They know more about us than we know about ourselves,” Gaymon said.

Local people helping those moving into Columbus need to keep one thing in mind, Gaymon said.

“You better be honest with them,” Gaymon said. “Because they probably already know the answer to the question they are asking you.”

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Housing and schools

More than 6,800 school-aged children are expected in that onslaught.

Thursday at Fort Knox, schools from throughout the region had booths set up to provide information to soldiers and their families. There were private schools such as Brookstone, St. Anne Pacelli Catholic School and Glenwood, and public schools from Opelika to Muscogee County.

Danni Harris, president of St. Anne Pacelli, made the trip to Fort Knox.

“We have been hearing there are 6,200 or more school-aged children coming and 8 percent to 10 percent are going to want private schools,” Harris said. “Now, we have names.”

Staff Sgt. Finley Alexander and his wife, Jennifer, were focusing on the education question as they walked with their daughter, Jessica, who will be a first-grader when she starts school in the Columbus area fall 2011. Her sister will be a fifth-grader.

The Alexanders just relocated to Kentucky from Fort Hood, Texas.

“I am looking at curriculum,” Jennifer Alexander said. “I want to make sure curriculum levels are not low. Fort Hood was superior. They focused a lot on computer education — that’s what we are looking for.”

Phenix City Superintendent Larry DiChiara is using a Georgia law to pitch his Alabama public schools.

“Our job is to sell Phenix City — and we sell low property taxes and the fact that Alabama doesn’t tax military retirement benefits,” DiChiara said. “But I am also selling the HOPE Scholarship.”

The law allows active duty military stationed at a Georgia post to be eligible for HOPE regardless of where they reside or where their kids go to school. The students must meet the academic requirements to receive the scholarship that pays tuition and partial book fees to Georgia colleges and universities.

“I am telling them you can educate your children in Alabama and still get HOPE,” DiChiara said.

Jennifer Alexander had the answer when asked where they planned to live.

“Roll Tide,” she said as she looked at her husband.

Other soldiers are weighing their housing options, as well.

Staff Sgt. Tim Koch is an instructor who expects to make the move to Columbus, probably in June of next year. Single, with a dog, Koch knows he will be renting a house, and he already has a pretty good idea where he wants to live.

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“I am looking right now in North Columbus and over in Alabama,” said Koch, who’s been researching housing on the Internet.

Staff Sgt. Patrick Fitzgerald, like Koch, has been surfing the Web for off-post housing.

One of the things Fort Knox soldiers are finding is their housing allowance will go further in the Columbus region. Fitzgerald, who is married with children, is looking to rent a three bedroom house.

“The prices are pretty nice,” he said.

High anxiety

The next year will be a time of anxiety for those facing the move to Columbus, said Lt. Col. Larry Reeves, who commands the 2nd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment.

And the cure to that anxiety is accurate information.

“There is huge anxiety because of the unknowns,” Reeves said. “Most of my guys have never been to Benning.”

But the information fair Thursday at Fort Knox helped, he said.

“This is showing the goodness of Columbus,” Reeves said. “Most people don’t realize it, but this is a huge step up from where they are right now. Columbus is a great city.”

Reeves, a Georgia native raised in Fayetteville, said the soldiers will be fine. It’s the families that need convincing.

“Most of the families are concerned: Where will I live? Where will the kids go to school? Will it be better than what I have now?” said Reeves, who will not be making the move, though many under his command will.

And part of that process is learning about the benefits, such as the HOPE scholarship.

“HOPE is a great thing,” Reeves said. “If you’ve got high school-aged kids, that’s important.”

For spouses like Gary, the mom concerned about finding a high school for her daughter, the move to Columbus can’t come quick enough.

“I want to go now,” she said. “I can’t wait to get to Georgia. I plan to stay a long time and grow old down there.”

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