

People boom from BRAC at Fort Benning about to be seen

Fort Benning's population will begin to rise in March, then surge sharply over the summer

By Tony Adams
Ledger-Enquirer
January 2, 2011

<http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2011/01/02/1404183/people-boom-from-brac-at-fort.html>

It was more than five years ago that the federal government unveiled plans to relocate the U.S. Army Armor School and Center to Fort Benning, launching an expansion not seen at the post since the buildup to the Vietnam War.

And it's taken time to put the pieces in place for the moment when a small city of soldiers and civilians arrive from Fort Knox, Ky., and other installations around the world to staff an infantry/armor-blended organization called the Maneuver Center of Excellence.

Gary Jones, the military affairs executive with the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, understands the frustration that some in the local community felt -- housing developers and businesses in particular -- when soldiers didn't start rolling in just after the Army's November 2005 Base Realignment and Closure announcement.

"They heard the who, the what, the where, the why, the how ... but they didn't listen to the when," said Jones, who has been the chamber's connection to Fort Benning throughout the expansion.

The when, as Jones refers to it, is about to begin.

Starting in March, soldiers, civilian workers and some family members will begin relocating to Fort Benning. The pace is expected to pick up in May as schools let out and more families with children make their way to the Columbus area.

By mid-September, Fort Benning is projected to have in its ranks as many as 28,000 more troops, civilian staffers (both Department of the Army and contractors) and spouses with children.

That number includes about 2,000 construction contractors now working to finish up the Harmony Church training facilities and other structures that the Armor School will use beginning this month when the inaugural mechanic training course starts with about 35 students. About 1,500 of the construction workers are expected to go away in 2012 or 2013 as infrastructure is completed on the post, conceded Jones.

"But if the military opts to build more out there, then that number would prove to be invalid," he said of Fort Benning, which continues to support active conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Still, when the dust settles on the massive BRAC expansion at the end of this year, the post's working population will have swollen from just over 45,000 in mid-2005 to nearly 57,000, a significant increase in an austere national economic climate.

Civilian hiring at the Maneuver Center of Excellence itself is entering its final few months, said Blanche Robinson, director for Fort Benning's Civilian Personnel Advisory Center. There are only 250 more

People boom from BRAC at Fort Benning about to be seen

staffers needed to get the training facility up to full strength at about 1,500 workers. That's because the Army speeded up the hiring earlier this year, she said.

Aside from the Maneuver Center, there are other groups of civilian workers on post, according to Brandon Cockrell, chief of Benning's Plans, Analysis & Integration Office. They include about 1,700 federal workers with the garrison command. Another 1,800 contractors perform various services on post to keep it running. Those positions include security guards, specialists writing combat doctrine and people operating the ranges.

The Maneuver Center hiring, Robinson said, is likely the biggest project she has ever tackled simply in terms of sheer numbers.

"The applicant pool has been more than robust for all of the vacancies," she said. "We had blue collar as well as white collar positions, and to date we have experienced no difficulty in sending out referral lists" to hiring managers. There have been between 17 and 40 applicants per vacancy, she said.

Another aspect of the post's expansion and its impact on employment is the defense industry that is expected to support the installation's various missions.

Becca Hardin, executive vice president of economic development at the chamber said she expected to see more defense activity thus far, but believes that will change as the Sept. 15 deadline mandated by the Army to complete BRAC activities draws closer.

Beyond that, Hardin said Fort Benning's expansion, along with other companies deciding to do business in the area -- such as ATM manufacturer NCR Corp. -- bode well for the job market. Both U.S. and international manufacturers are looking at the area, she said.

"I've been here 10 years and I've never seen the volume of project activity at its peak the way it is right now," Hardin said. "We're also seeing companies that have had growth plans just chill for the past two years ... starting to be optimistic about the economy."

As for Jones at the chamber, there's one other indicator that the Armor Center's move to this Deep South post -- where famed armor Gen. George S. Patton once served -- will soon become reality.

A final relocation information fair is scheduled at Fort Knox on March 31. There have been four so far, with everyone from real-estate and financial companies to school systems and colleges representing the Columbus and Phenix City area. Jones said the last one was requested by the people at Fort Knox.