

October 2006

## Full Speed Ahead

Communities are gearing up for a new round of military base expansions.

*By Gwen Moran*

In November 2005, the federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission's plan for closing, consolidating, and expanding military bases throughout the U.S. became law. This round of recommendations is the largest BRAC implementation to date, according to the Association of Defense Communities, a membership organization that supports base communities. In all, 800 installations will be affected by the plan, which covers 22 major base closures, 33 realignments, and 13 expansions.



While BRAC's focus is generally on communities that will lose bases — and the substantial economic activity that comes with them — certain areas will face significant growth-related issues as bases expand, in some cases increasing local populations by double-digit percentages over a few years.

Tim Ford, executive director of the association, says that several communities could grow as much by the 2011 BRAC implementation deadline as they normally would in a decade or two. "In many instances, you're building and populating entire cities with these changes," he says. "You don't usually have that kind of mass

migration in normal growth patterns."

Absorbing thousands or, in some cases, tens of thousands of new residents in less than five years can challenge even the most solid municipal or county infrastructure, throwing planners into a crisis mode. Housing, schools, roads, and municipal services can all be strained to the breaking point if the growth is not managed properly. The good news is that there are resources to help. But the time to get ready for growth is now.

### **Fast-growing Columbus, Georgia**

Columbus, Georgia, which is consolidated with Muscogee County (pop. 188,965), sits on the Alabama border, about 80 miles southwest of Atlanta. According to the Association of Defense Communities, the Columbus area can expect a whopping 9,830 new military and civilian jobs when the Armor Center and School moves from Fort Knox, Kentucky, to Fort Benning, an Army installation that focuses primarily on training. Most of the incoming personnel and their families will be living in the community, as opposed to on base, placing new demands on the housing supply.

"We're looking for 75 percent of the new military influx to happen in Muscogee County. The remaining 25 percent will be in surrounding counties," says Rick Jones, AICP, director of planning for the Columbus Consolidated Government.

Columbus was already on a fast track for growth. Jones says that while the area was almost wholly dependent on Fort Benning for its economic activity several decades ago, in recent years there has been an influx of financial and insurance companies and other businesses. Insurance giant Aflac recently announced plans to add about 2,000 jobs at its headquarters, and South Korean auto manufacturer Kia plans to open its first U.S. plant about 40 miles away in West Point, Georgia. Columbus is also home to a division of Eastman Kodak and TSYS, a global provider of credit card processing services.

Spurred by this growth, Jones says, Columbus has already done a complete inventory of land uses, including lots available for home building, and has reviewed its zoning regulations for potential changes. In addition, Muscogee County completed its long-range transportation plan in late 2004, an effort that is

updated annually.

Because the area affected is near the Alabama border, and some of the relocated personnel are likely to make their homes in that state, Jones and his team have been working with both the Georgia and Alabama transportation departments to create a joint planning organization to address regional issues.

The new residents are expected to bring some 10,200 public school students to the Chattahoochee Valley, says John Phillips, superintendent of the Muscogee County School District. That influx will represent a nearly 30 percent increase in the school system, which now serves about 33,000 students. Smaller school districts in other counties could see as much as 50 percent growth, he says.

"We've been planning for growth — the normal growth based on census and other data that affect demographics — but we certainly didn't anticipate this level," Phillips says. "The resulting growth [from military realignment] is going to be cataclysmic, because it's not going to come over five or six years; it will likely come over a two-year period."

So many new students mean new schools and new teachers. Lots of new teachers. Phillips anticipates that he will need to hire 200 to 250 new teachers in addition to the 150 to 200 a year he typically hires to fill open positions. The district has already started recruiting at regional colleges and universities. The area also needs to plan for, fund, and develop new schools — a tricky prospect in an environment where approval of school budgets depends on the shifting opinions of voters.

A solution that has worked in the past is a local option sales tax, Phillips says. The area has twice passed referendums authorizing a special one-cent sales tax increase for a period of five years, yielding \$150 million. Phillips says the community will likely consider such a tax again, along with tapping state funds and resources available through the Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment, which makes federal resources available to communities affected by BRAC.

Phillips has traveled to Washington, D.C., several times to meet with legislators and explain the impact of the installation's growth on the region's education system. He and the administrators of four other affected school districts in Georgia and three in Alabama have formed the Chattahoochee Valley Coalition, which has also met with legislators, state officials, and representatives of the Defense Department. "It keeps us on their minds and on their radar about the needs we're going to have," he says.

### **The big one: El Paso, Texas**



The community facing the biggest growth is also possibly the most challenging. El Paso, Texas, with about 600,000 residents, is home to the Army's Fort Bliss. While the ADC expects the base to add some 11,390 jobs, city manager Joyce Wilson expects the total number of new residents to approach 50,000. That represents an eight percent population growth for the community.

Historically, El Paso has added about 3,200 new housing units per year, but growth estimates push the must-add number to 5,000 a year by the BRAC deadline of 2011. The city has already done a land-use study and has moved quickly on an annexation program that will make more land available for housing development. According to Wilson, El Paso has earmarked 3,500 acres for development, enough to accommodate 8,000 new houses. City planners have also identified other parcels that could provide space for 4,000 more homes and are considering selling additional public lands, as needed.

Because El Paso's growth is occurring in the center of a city, where the base is located and where land is already at a premium, quality of life became a big issue early in the process. Recent smart growth initiatives and new zoning encourage mixed use development, along with open space and recreational facilities. El Paso has also embarked on a joint project with Fort Bliss to build a \$5 million, 20-field soccer complex.

The city has opened a one-stop shop, consolidating planning, building permits, and inspections on one

floor of city hall. Wilson says that this helps to facilitate communication about projects and allows processing of permits and approvals in a more timely manner than before. "We've created a program where it's easier to get subdivisions and bigger construction projects permitted," she says.

Currently the city has about \$250 million worth of capital infrastructure improvements under way, including new streets and drains in the neighborhoods adjacent to the base. In addition, Wilson and her team are working with the local chamber of commerce on a special program to ensure that the spouses of military personnel moving into the area have adequate employment opportunities.

"For El Paso, this is like having two Toyota plants come into the community in a short period of time," says Brian Pieplow, AICP, vice president and director of planning for the HNTB Federal Services Corporation in Washington, D.C. The transportation and planning consulting firm has worked with a number of communities facing fast-paced growth. Pieplow notes: "Communities sometimes forget the multiplier effect: It's more than just the military personnel. It's also families and civilian workers."

### **Fort Leonard Wood does it well**

Adding to the challenge is the fact that such widespread up-sizing of bases is new, resulting in few models for planners to follow. One community that faced fast-paced growth and came out ahead is the Army's Fort Leonard Wood in Pulaski County, Missouri, which was affected by the last BRAC action in 1995. However, according to Pieplow, even that effort took a period of trial and error.

Fort Leonard Wood went through a previous expansion in 1988, but Pieplow says that the community failed to develop a coordinated response. Housing was built haphazardly along substandard county roads, and there were not enough jobs to employ the spouses of military personnel moving to the area. "It was not a pleasant experience," Pieplow says.

"That motivated the communities around Fort Leonard Wood to prepare a growth management plan for the next BRAC action in 1995, and everyone was really pleased with the outcome," he adds.

In 1999, the fort added more than 2,000 military and civilian personnel. (Pulaski County had just over 38,000 residents.) The region's elementary and high school population grew by 12 percent when two training facilities moved from Alabama's Fort McClellan.

"We were looking at the Fort Leonard Wood area almost doubling the population of students and permanent personnel," recalls retired Army General Robert Flowers, who oversaw the base expansion.

In response, the affected communities formed a regional entity, the Fort Leonard Wood Regional Commerce and Growth Association, which served as a focal point for questions related to the Fort McClellan reassignment. A primary issue was the lack of housing for the new population, Flowers says. The RCGA "worked hard at attracting development, [which included] establishing building codes, because there were no building codes at the time." The result was the construction of more than 1,200 housing units.

The close relationship between Flowers, base personnel, and the RCGA also encouraged commercial development, including a new Wal-Mart, two strip malls, and 12 hotels, according to the Association of Defense Communities report, *When an Installation Grows: The Impact of Expanding Missions on Communities*, released in January 2005.

### **New housing in Petersburg, Virginia**



Last fall, officials from south-central Virginia brought in business leaders from Fort Leonard Wood to discuss how they would manage the expansion of Fort Lee, located near Petersburg, Virginia, about 23 miles south of Richmond. In the Petersburg area, one of every four jobs is connected to Fort Lee, according to Dennis Morris, executive director of the Crater Planning District Commission, which focuses on industrial, commercial, and small business development in 10 communities surrounding Fort Lee.

Morris says that, over the next few years, the Army installation will welcome 4,200 new permanent military and civilian personnel, as well as an additional 3,400 family members. About 4,500 indirect, nongovernmental jobs are expected to be created in sectors such as health care and other services.

Morris is also the coordinator of the Civilian Military Council, a consortium of community members directly affected by the military realignment, including local business owners, fire departments, law enforcement agencies, and elected officials. Working with the chamber of commerce, the CMC has hosted meetings with local home builders, while Army personnel meet with military and civilian personnel who will be transferred to the area to learn more about their needs.

"One group will be coming to us out of Alexandria, Virginia," Morris says. "If you're living in Alexandria, you're not necessarily concerned about the cost of living in the Richmond metro area. Another group is coming to us from Huntsville, Alabama. In that case, the cost of living may be a real concern."

Morris anticipates that the installation's growth will result in some significant subcontracting opportunities, and the CMC is working with local businesses to ensure that they have the proper certification and understand the protocols of working with the federal government.

### **Tapping available resources**

While the coordination of everything from new schools and roads to new housing and business opportunities may seem daunting, the good news for many communities is that there are a number of resources available. First and foremost is the Defense Department's Office of Economic Adjustment, which was organized specifically to help communities affected by military closures, expansions, and realignments.

OEA director Patrick O'Brien notes that the planning efforts help communities understand what's going to happen: How much growth can they expect? What types of dependents are coming in? What employment opportunities will be needed? What new infrastructure and services — from utilities to fire and police personnel — are going to be needed?

"[We tell them to] anticipate having to confront some anxieties in the process, but knowing what to expect and the resources that are available can make it easier," O'Brien says.

In addition, some communities have found money and resources through state governments. Dennis Morris says that funding for his area's transportation upgrades will come from the base, the state, and the municipality. The Virginia General Assembly has approved \$25 million through 2008.

Still, all of those resources can be difficult to channel effectively when it's unclear exactly when all of this moving around will be complete.

In Columbus, Georgia, Rick Jones is skeptical about the 2011 deadline because of environmental concerns. He says that construction to accommodate the new workers at Fort Benning cannot begin until an environmental impact survey is complete, but that could take as long as 24 months. And while John Phillips says he was originally led to believe that his student ranks would swell in the 2007–08 school year, that estimate has already slipped to the following year.

### **What to do now**

Pieplow warns that waiting for exact numbers and dates can put fast-growth communities far behind the curve in meeting their deadlines. The experts say that communities facing growth as a result of BRAC or other military activities should all be completing some universal tasks, including:

- **Assessments:** A thorough inventory of housing capacity, land use, transportation infrastructure, and other community needs should be conducted as soon as possible to determine how much development and enhancement will be necessary, advises Pieplow.
- **Coalition- and relationship-building:** Fort Leonard Wood's successful expansion was the result of excellent communication between the base and the community, as well as a

dedicated team of community members, says Flowers. El Paso, Columbus, and the Crater Valley region of Virginia have all created local economic development commissions or project-specific teams to tackle the myriad issues associated with rapid growth. Municipal or county planners should be meeting regularly — as often as weekly — with high-ranking representatives of the base, says O'Brien.

- **Planning:** Having a plan for growth is essential, says Pieplow. The plan should include an analysis and explanation of how the community will meet housing, transportation, education, and essential services needs, as well as potential funding sources for those projects. However, that plan needs to be flexible enough to allow for adjustments in timeline since, as planners like Jones note, some of the deadlines in such a massive transition seem overly ambitious.

As community planners consider the impact of significant growth on military installations as a result of this most recent round of BRAC and other military actions, managing the transition will be no small task. Creating a team approach to the situation, working with military and community personnel, and maintaining constant communication seems to be the right formula for a smooth transition.

*Gwen Moran is a freelance writer in New Jersey.*

---

## How Does Your Community Grow?

According to the Association of Defense Communities, the top 10 metropolitan areas facing significant growth because of BRAC 2005 are:

<b>Jobs Gained</b>	<b>City</b>
1,395	El Paso, Texas (Fort Bliss)
9,830	Columbus, Georgia (Fort Benning)
7,019	Richmond, Virginia (Fort Lee)
4,373	Colorado Springs, Colorado (Fort Carson)
3,547	Lawton, Oklahoma (Fort Sill)
3,146	Baltimore-Towson, Maryland (Fort Meade, Aberdeen Proving Ground)
3,102	Little Rock-North Little Rock, Arkansas (Little Rock AFB)
2,832	San Antonio, Texas (Fort Sam Houston)
2,787	Bethesda-Frederick-Gaithersburg, Maryland (National Naval Medical Center)
2,752	Manhattan, Kansas (Fort Riley)

Totals include net job gains in the listed metropolitan statistical area for military, civilian, and contractor positions. The San Antonio total accounts for substantial job losses at Brooks City-Base and Lackland AFB.

---

## Resources

**Images:** Top — Columbus, Georgia, is expected to gain 10,000 new military and civilian jobs when tasks shift to Fort Benning. Photo courtesy U.S. Army. Middle — Major Elizabeth Smith explains the opportunities at Fort Bliss, which expects to add more than 11,000 jobs to the El Paso area. Photo courtesy U.S. Army. Bottom — Downtown Petersburg, Virginia, has been on the upswing as an arts and entertainment district. Doug Buerlein Photography.

The Association of Defense Communities website is [www.defensecommunities.org](http://www.defensecommunities.org).

The Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment can be found at [www.oea.gov](http://www.oea.gov).

*©Copyright 2006 American Planning Association All Rights Reserved*