

Benning's boost from BRAC expected to impact surrounding housing, retail sectors

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Putting a roof over their heads and looking for a place to purchase food and other goods such as clothing and electronics.

Those two areas of the Columbus economy -- housing and retail -- are expected to be among the biggest winners financially as Fort Benning's population blossoms by as many as 28,000 people starting in March and moving into September.

"We've experienced a good bit of the trickle-in effect of the early moves and have sold a number of houses," said Jack Key, a partner with the real-estate firm Coldwell Banker/Kennon, Parker, Duncan & Key, which does business in Georgia and Alabama.

"The bulk of it is not supposed to come, though, until about May, and we're expecting a flood of people in here," he said. "It should resemble an avalanche between May 1 and October 1."

The federally mandated deadline for everything being completed for the U.S. Army's relocation of the Armor School and Center from Fort Knox, Ky., to Fort Benning is Sept. 15. That includes \$3.5 billion in construction and the modernization of facilities on the post situated along Columbus' eastern and southern border.

Fort Benning expects about 30 percent of its population to live on post, with the rest either purchasing a home or renting in the surrounding community, Keith Lovejoy, the post's residential communities initiative asset manager, said in an e-mail.

Though he can't gauge it for certain, "I personally believe it will be around a 20/80 split ... 20 percent buying and the remainder renting," Lovejoy said.

The military installation is now in the fifth year of a 10-year redevelopment of its on-post housing. Privatization of the properties will culminate with 4,000 newly built or renovated units. That compares to 4,200 units before.

Lovejoy said roughly half of those relocating to the Maneuver Center of Excellence -- a blend of the infantry and armor schools -- will likely live on post.

"We have up to this point been able to accommodate all requests for on-post housing for the initial push of Fort Knox soldiers," he said.

An advance party of several dozen Armor School personnel began showing up about six months ago to prepare for larger waves that will hit this spring and summer.

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Those making the move from Kentucky and other military installations around the world to the Maneuver Center have been looking at the housing market for months, Key said. Some have researched property on the Internet, with others visiting to scope out the area.

The big boon

While Columbus will be the center of the housing market, the soldiers and civilian workers, and their families, are expected to spread out into the suburbs. That includes Harris and Chattahoochee counties in Georgia and the Alabama communities of Phenix City, Fort Mitchell and Smiths Station.

Several new apartment complexes also are either under construction or on the drawing boards in the Columbus area, waiting for the troops to land.

“We think that’s going to be a big boon to the rental housing market here,” Key said. “The rental market is pretty strong and has been brisk. We got some good activity when the 3rd Brigade returned several months ago (from Iraq), and the Fort Knox move should make all the difference in the world.”

The retail sector also is expected to get a major shot in its financial arm as the good-paying jobs connected to Fort Benning materialize this year. The post’s overall economic impact, for instance, is forecast by the military to jump from \$4.3 billion to just under \$6 billion when everything is in place.

The post’s population increase and the cash flowing from additional paychecks should mean the need for more establishments such as restaurants, stores, hair salons, dry cleaners and gas stations.

“There will have to be a boost just to be able to support the influx of population,” said Becca Hardin, executive vice president of economic development at the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce. “Our economic models show that for every one job that’s created with our pure economic development efforts, four spinoff jobs are created.”

More specifically, the University of Georgia’s Selig Center for Economic Growth anticipates there will be between 4,000 and 6,000 jobs created on the local economy because of the military buildup.

“You’ve got to think that with nearly 30,000 new neighbors, the movie theaters, the furniture stores, the car dealers, the restaurants, the grocery stores, the sporting goods stores, just about everything is going to get a big lift,” said Key, a former chamber chairman. “I can only imagine what it’s going to be like to have something akin the size of Rome, Georgia, drop in the middle of our market, kind of overnight.”

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BY THE NUMBERS

Economic impact numbers from the Base Realignment and Closure expansion that is now occurring at Fort Benning:

BEFORE BRAC

\$110 million: Monthly salaries generated at Fort Benning (annual total of \$1.32 billion)

\$250 million: Monthly regional contracts with businesses at post (\$3 billion annually)

\$4.3 billion: Current total economic impact of post on the area

AFTER BRAC

\$35 million: Additional annual contract/salary impact (\$420 million per year)

\$986.3 million: Increase in annual sales in region

\$246.2 million: Increase in annual salaries/income on post

\$5.97 billion: Projected total economic impact of post after BRAC expansion (\$1.65 billion more than before BRAC)

Source: Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce and Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority