

## Fort Benning officials eye land in Harris, Talbot counties for possible expansion

By Jim Mustian  
Ledger-Enquirer  
January 6, 2011

<http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2011/01/06/1408937/fort-benning-officials-eye-more.html>

Fort Benning officials surveying several swaths of surrounding land for a possible post expansion have expanded the scope of a feasibility study to include portions of Harris and Talbot counties.

The counties were not initially included in the study because wide tracts of property to the northeast of Fort Benning are protected by the Army Compatibility Use Buffer, a program that protects natural resources around military installations. But MeadWestvaco, a land management agent, has since expressed interest in selling up to 23,000 acres in Harris and Talbot counties, said Monica Manganaro, a Fort Benning spokeswoman.

“That’s key because, as part of this land acquisition first and foremost, we want to be able to purchase property from willing sellers,” Manganaro said. “So it makes sense that we would look at this area, but we also wanted to explain why it wasn’t included in the first brush.”

In all, post officials are examining about 260,000 acres in Russell, Stewart, Marion, Webster, Chattahoochee, Harris and Talbot counties. A year ago, Fort Benning received the green light from Washington to conduct a study to whittle that area down to 82,800 acres for a possible expansion.

“We’ve only been given approval to study,” Manganaro said. “We haven’t been approved yet to purchase any land.”

As Fort Benning currently encompasses about 182,000 acres, an acquisition of 82,800 acres would account for about a 45 percent expansion to a post that already ranks among the largest in the country.

“Our footprint hasn’t changed significantly in many years,” Manganaro said. “So this is really a significant move forward.”

The study is being conducted at a time when the U.S. Army is finalizing the relocation of its Armor School and Center to Fort Benning from Fort Knox, Ky., a move expected to bring thousands of additional soldiers to the post. But post officials stressed that the military has long since identified the need for expanded training grounds at Fort Benning.

In the next phase of the expansion project, post officials plan to unveil a “preferred alternative” some time this spring identifying which lands -- if any -- Fort Benning will seek to acquire, Deputy Garrison Commander George Steuber said. That announcement is to be followed by another public comment period.

So far, officials have encountered a “mixed bag” in response from local residents who could potentially be impacted, Steuber said.

## **Fort Benning officials eye land in Harris, Talbot counties for possible expansion**

“There’s a certain amount of angst that goes with potentially expanding the installation, and that’s understandable,” Manganaro said, adding some residents have voiced concerns over the impact on property values. “But there are also individuals who want to sell and look at this as an opportunity for economic growth.”

In speaking to residents about an expansion, Steuber said he has sought to emphasize the positive.

“Instead of looking at this as ‘The glass is half empty, they’re coming to take my land,’ how about looking at it as an economic opportunity?” Steuber said. “The sounds that you hear coming from Fort Benning are the sounds of freedom -- not nuisance.”

[CLICK TO SEE MAP OF LAND BEING CONSIDERED](#)