

# Fort Benning commander recaps first 100 days

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As the Fort Benning work force expands, the positives outweigh the negatives, the MCoE and Fort Benning commander said Wednesday.

With his first 100 days “on the ground” behind him, Maj. Gen. Robert Brown met with local media to discuss the Maneuver Center’s transformation and upcoming initiatives to break down walls between the installation and its 10 neighboring counties.

“Some of these counties have very little exposure to (Fort Benning) ... and part of that is our fault. There’s a perception that they can’t come on base,” the general said.

The perception, he said, stems from security efforts put in place following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The general called for the post to strike a better balance, saying “the worst thing we can do is stay in our own little world.”

He identified several initiatives the post plans to launch in upcoming months, including a partnership between major Fort Benning commands and local counties. The partnership would bring county leaders to the post and invite Soldiers to help in the local communities, participating in volunteer efforts such as House of Heroes.

Brown also encouraged area residents to come on post and use Fort Benning’s golf course and attend events, such as the Toby Keith concert scheduled for May 29 and the Independence Day celebration July 2.

The award-winning program Partners In Education also received a recognition from the general, who said he’d like to see the program continue. The program partners Fort Benning units with area schools to help out when needed, read stories to students and participate in Big Brother, Big Sister-type activities, he said.

Brown said the initiatives are meant to tear down barriers between local residents and the installation because as the installation grows “the last thing we want is for them to perceive this big wall around the post.”

An economist reported Fort Benning brings about \$100 million a month to the local community, the general said.

That number is expected to increase by \$20 million with the Armor School.

With the projected increase of Soldiers, Department of the Army civilians, contractors and their families there will also be more traffic around Fort Benning and more people looking to rent or buy homes in the community.

Nearly 70 percent of people moving to Fort Benning during the coming months will be living off post, said Col. Tom Macdonald, Fort Benning’s garrison commander.

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Macdonald, nicknamed Fort Benning's "mayor," oversees the daily operations of the installation and said on-post housing is currently at 85 percent of occupancy, leading many families to look in the tricommunity area.

Macdonald addressed traffic concerns, both on and off the installation, saying that road construction efforts may contribute to current traffic woes but will prevent future traffic congestion. Several popular travel routes are being widened on post, including Dixie Road and Marne Road. The Marne Road Bridge expansion and the new interchange being constructed on Lindsay Creek Parkway will also alleviate traffic stress, he said. All of the projects will be complete by September.

The new Harmony Church access control point off of U.S. Route 27/280 is expected to open in mid-March. The seven-lane gate will be the largest on Fort Benning and feature separate inspection points for trucks and cars and a Visitor's Center. The opening was delayed to give gate personnel time to train on security protocols, Macdonald said.

Fifty-five Department of the Army guards will man the gate.

Though traffic projects may be the most visible signs of the post's impending growth, Macdonald said there are several upgrades and renovations around Main Post, the training areas and ranges currently underway. Cuartels on Main Post are being renovated to create barracks for the Officer Candidate School and the NCO Academy and nearby storage warehouses are being converted into high-tech classrooms packed with high-powered projectors, plasma television screens, laptops and Smart Notebook software.

The \$3.5 billion construction effort extends through 2016 and includes not only Armor School-related development but also the building of an Army hotel and a new hospital, projected to be complete in 2013 and 2014, respectively.

Macdonald said the post has executed approximately \$2 billion worth of construction so far, spending about \$2.5 million a day.

## Armor School progress

About 300 Armor School personnel are now stationed at Fort Benning, with thousands more expected to arrive during the summer, the general said.

The first three Armor School courses to transfer from Fort Knox began in January.

By April 23, 50 percent of Armor School courses will be located at Fort Benning, with the rest to follow throughout the summer, said Command Sgt. Maj. Chris Hardy, the Maneuver Center's senior enlisted leader. Fort Benning currently trains 12,500 Soldiers each day, adding up to about 120,000 last year.

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With the addition of Armor School students, Fort Benning is now a “Tier 1” installation — one of 11 Armywide and the only training installation ranked that high, he said.

The Army uses a tiered system based upon the number of personnel processing through the installation each year. The high rating speaks to “the enormity of what’s going on here at Fort Benning,” Hardy said.

Together, the Armor and Infantry branches total 130,000 Soldiers.

Once the transformation is complete, every Soldier, NCO and officer in the Armor and Infantry branches will receive initial, mid-level and senior-level professional development training at Fort Benning at some point in their career, he said.

## Land expansion update

Last summer, Fort Benning announced the Department of the Army approved a plan allowing the installation to study the possibility of expanding its training lands by 82,800 acres.

The additional training land — approximately 40 percent more than the post’s current square acreage — would allow two heavy maneuver battalions and elements of the Maneuver Center to train simultaneously.

The study, which was estimated to take about 15 to 18 months, is “well underway,” said Macdonald.

A draft of the environmental impact statement for the study will be finalized in April and the public will have the opportunity to comment on it.

By law, Fort Benning must look at all areas adjacent to the installation, including Chattahoochee, Harris, Marion, Muscogee, Russell, Stewart, Talbot and Webster counties.

“You will see a tighter shot group on the area we are interested in,” Macdonald said.

The study is expected to be complete by the end of the year.

## The general's take ... on women in combat

“I’ve had the same opinion for about 20 years on that. I have three daughters and one is a captain deployed to Iraq — she was in harm’s way more than I would like her to have been. As a dad, it was pretty tough. I’ve been asked this a lot starting from when I was a captain because people knew I had daughters. My stance — and this is just my personal belief on this, not Army policy, though I know they are looking at this — my belief is that there should be one standard and we should figure out what that standard is, based on the requirements for the particular job. Not a male

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standard and a female standard, but a standard of what's needed, and anyone that can attain that standard can do that (job).

"... I've had several officers work for me in the past, a female MP and a platoon leader that were in the thick of combat as much as anybody. They were in harm's way. It's a different battlefield today, there are no front lines or back lines, it's a non-contiguous battlefield ... there's no safe area for anybody. There are females in harm's way today and have been for quite some time and females who've paid the ultimate price."

... on 'don't ask, don't tell' repeal "Right now we are starting to get some of the guidance on training. Regardless of sexual orientation, we look to treat everyone with dignity and respect. I agree with the report completely when it says the key to implementing this would be leadership. No doubt about it. The leadership will be the key to implementing the change in the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. Diversity is one of our strengths. Will there be hurdles? Yeah, sure. But the leadership will be key and we have great leaders."