

Fort Knox troops moving to Benning ponder where to live in Columbus area

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FORT KNOX, Ky. -- To rent or buy? Georgia or Alabama? On post or off? Which area of town? This school or that one?

Those are the critical questions facing soldiers and family members of the U.S. Army Armor School and Center at Fort Knox as they get set to pack their bags and belongings for the 500-mile journey south to Fort Benning this spring and summer.

Indecision? There is plenty of that to go around, according to conversations with troops soaking up information at an event Thursday. The Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce-organized information fair drew in excess of 1,000 uniformed and civilian people.

Among them were Staff Sgt. Phillip Clay and his wife, Mesha, who have until early September to report to the Georgia military installation that is blending the armor and infantry branches into one organization called the Manuever Center of Excellence. Sept. 15 is the date mandated for everyone to be in place.

Where to live, naturally, is on everyone's mind as the deadline grows closer.

The Clays, with sons Vincent, 5, and Quinton, 1, are looking into housing on post, but if it isn't sufficient, they plan to move off post, a move Mesha has no problem with.

"I felt like the off-base housing was actually very nice," she said, pointing out a 2,600-square-foot home is her preference and that she plans to move here in advance of her husband in May. "I love the houses down there and they look pretty spacious, and I like the architecture on the outside. Some are in Columbus, some are in Alabama, and some are in Fort Mitchell."

But others already are in Columbus and have settled in with their children in school. That includes Lt. Col. Antonio Austin, the rear detachment commander of the Armor School and the person tasked with shutting down the Fort Knox operation.

In fact, Austin and his wife, Tanisha, closed on their 2,500-square-foot Sonoma Pointe home in north Columbus last July. Their three children are enrolled at Columbus High School and schools on Blackmon Road.

"My wife liked the area," Austin said. "It's a little bit farther away from post. But there's a nice shopping area, the convenience of having nice stores, restaurants and movies close to you."

Still, soldiers are forming their perception of the Columbus and Phenix City area through online research, events like those held at Fort Knox and, quite simply, word of mouth. And the views of incoming troops and their families run the gamut.

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“There were two big decisions for us,” Austin said. “One was Alabama or Georgia. The other ... there is the perception that north and northeast Columbus is a better area. We looked at it more for property value, and if that property was going to maintain a certain level. This is probably not my retirement house, so we want at some point to be able to sell it and do well with it. That was my primary consideration.”

Two homebuilders in the local area, who attended Thursday’s information fair and talked with those preparing for transfers here, came away with distinct conclusions that have only reinforced what they originally thought.

“We’ve been figuring all along that maybe 20 or 25 percent would buy initially, and that’s what we’re seeing here just chatting with them,” said Hugh Morton, president of Peachtree Homes, which is constructing houses in Fort Mitchell, Ala., south of Phenix City and near Fort Benning’s back gate. “Probably 75 percent are going to wait and rent and try to size the market up and see what their career is going to entail the next couple of years.”

Dave Erickson, president of Grayhawk Homes, which builds in Columbus and Phenix City, concurred. But he said there could be a major hitch for anyone who decides to sit on the fence in terms of finding housing locally.

“Based on the number of people I’m hearing say they want to rent, and the supply of rental property that’s available, I think there’s a huge imbalance,” he said. “And I think a lot of people are going to be very disappointed when they show up and nothing’s available.”

But that likely will change, Erickson said, when more new apartments now being constructed come on line in the next six to eight months. The surge in new apartments will alter the purchase-versus-rental market in predictable ways, he said.

“In the end, on a technical basis, new homes cannot survive if there’s huge oversupply of high-quality apartments. You’re just only going to sell a small amount,” the builder said. “At the same time, if apartments are very tight and expensive, then new homes start to be more attractive. And that pendulum moves back and forth depending on supply and demand and the price.”

The stakes are high for everyone from housing companies and retailers in the area to churches and schools. And the biggest divide is the Chattahoochee River, with more and more soldiers apparently deciding that lower taxes and cheaper home prices in Alabama are the deal maker.

That puts the Phenix City Public Schools system in a good position, admits Larry DiChiara, its superintendent. The 6,500-student system is expected to pick up at least 700 students from military families, he said, although that could go higher.

“I plan on living in Alabama” was the common refrain heard by DiChiara on Thursday. But his standard reply was to not necessarily take his word for it that the system and the community is a good place to be.

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“We tell the folks, we can give you the best sales pitch in the world, but don’t listen to us,” he said. “Go talk to the ones that are already there. (The school system) has gone from about 400 military children when I first became superintendent seven years ago to over 900 military students today.”

More than 1,000 soldiers from the U.S. Armor School at Fort Knox are gearing up for the move, with more heading to Fort Benning from other military posts to staff the 2,200-person armor training portions of the Maneuver Center. They all are part of an influx of roughly 28,000 soldiers, civilian workers and family members coming here as part of the local post’s Base Realignment and Closure expansion.

Comments from troops

With the U.S. Armor School troops hungry for information Thursday and looking to make a key decision that will impact the next major chapter in the lives of their careers and their families, the Ledger-Enquirer asked them their thoughts on the Columbus-area housing market and what they plan to do. Here’s what they had to say:

Maj. Joe Harrison, team chief, 32, Armor Reconnaissance Course, wife, Liz, and three kids ages 7, 3 and 2.

“I don’t plan on living on post. My wife has a horse and I’m thinking Fort Mitchell, Alabama, and better property taxes. That’s just a personal thing for my wife and I. She wants the horse on our property, so we have to get somewhere that has land.”

Staff Sgt. Adrian Tillotson, 45, senior instructor, Armor Reconnaissance Course, wife, Maria, and three grown children.

“We’re looking to move on post. My wife prefers it more than I do because we’re in the field quite a bit and she feels a little more secure on post than she does downtown somewhere ... What I’ve seen from Fort Benning, there seems to be a lot more restaurants and that type of thing that are closer by than having to drive all the way to Louisville if you want to take the wife out for a nice dinner.”

Staff Sgt. Talowa Bunton, 27, cavalry brigade, husband Staff Sgt. Antonio Bunton, children ages 2 and 2 months.

“We’ll rent. I don’t know how long I’m going to be there and I don’t want to deal with the hassle of trying to sell it or rent it when I leave.”

Staff Sgt. Romer Sepulveda, 31, basic training unit, wife and daughter, age 3.

“I might be renting an apartment or maybe staying on post. I’m not ready to buy a home. I’m only going to be there a year and a half, so as far as buying a place it won’t be convenient for me ... I’ve heard a lot about Phenix City in Alabama, but I’m not too sure about Columbus yet.”

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Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Burns, 28, drill sergeant, wife, Brandi, with 11-week-old son, Lennon.

“We’re looking into places ahead of time, but I don’t want to make a decision or anything right now. We’re hoping for (post) housing ... This the first time I’ve been stationed somewhere that you have to watch out for where you go because you might be in a bad neighborhood. So I’d rather just be able to stand there and look at the neighborhood I’m in and know what kind of neighbors I have, if we do go off post.

Sgt. 1st Class Keith Pruett, 39, instructor, Armor Reconnaissance Course, married with two boys, ages 13 and 3.

“I’ve never heard anyone worried about going down there. I’m excited about it. I like the Benning area. It’s closer to home for me. I was born and raised in Gadsden, Ala., plus I just like being in the South ... We’ve actually been searching for schools and housing areas. Our counterparts at Benning did a lot of research for us and gave us a lot of information and are pointing us in the right direction. We’ve been talking with agents down there, and talking to schools.

Spc. Miguel Torres, 29, cavalry regiment, wife, Heather, and son, Miguel Jr., 17 months old.

“Hopefully we’ll get on post. If not, we’ll probably go more towards the Alabama side. From what I’ve been hearing Columbus ain’t the place to go or to stay. So I’d rather be farther away. They just say it’s pretty bad, the crime rates. It’s not worth what you’re paying in rent either.”

Spc. Carlos Valentin, 27, weapons armorer, wife Jessica and two kids ages 7 and 1.

“We’re still trying to decide if we’re going to live on or off post. It all depends on how it is down there ... We’re going to wait until we get there and check around, look around Fort Benning.”

Staff Sgt. Greg Wesson, 32, armor brigade, wife, Jessica, and son, Kade, 6 months.

“We’re just looking to rent right now because I have no idea where the Army’s going to take me. I have a year left on the trail; I’m a drill sergeant for a year ... It’s a toss-up right now as to the area we’ll live. (Georgia and Alabama) both have good things. I’m just trying to put it all together to see if we can weigh the pros and cons to find out which way will be the best for my wife and son.”

Staff Sgt. Dustin Bunce, 35, wife, Erica, and two kids ages 3 and 2.

“We’re definitely going to rent or we’ll live on post. I wouldn’t buy in the Army. You just move around too much and to me it doesn’t make any sense. The Realtors I’ve talked to here have been very helpful. I still get contact from Realtors that I talked to at the (information fair) they had last year. So the Realtors down there have been awesome. They’re very supportive of the BRAC move and very helpful to the soldiers coming down ... We both kind of like Phenix City. We definitely want to be in Alabama. It’s cheaper for one, taxes are a lot lower than in Georgia and then the houses are cheaper. The houses that we’ve seen online to rent, you get a house just as

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nice in Alabama for a lot less than you would pay in Georgia ... I won't decide on a house until I get down there and see it in person."

1st Lt. Nathaniel Hetherman, 25, wife, Sun Hee, and daughter Daisy, 1.

"We're going down in late August. We're considering renting mainly because we're only there for a short stay. At a minimum everyone who's up here, when they go down (to Benning) they have to stay for one year. A lot of people are in that transition ... But I like the Columbus area. I like the fact that it's more of a major metropolitan area and that there's more to do there. There's not a ton of stuff to do right outside the gate here, whereas (Columbus) is fairly good-sized city ... We still have a lot of time, so we're still looking. We're looking at some of those gated (apartment) communities."