

Military plans to pump up 'heart of Harris County'

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY

HAMILTON, Ga. — This sleepy little town, laid out around its town square, has been virtually unchanged for the past 50 years. Located between Columbus to the south and LaGrange to the north, it boasts that it's "the heart of Harris County" and is little known for anything else.

That might be about to change. Harris County is on the cusp of explosive growth generated by expansion of nearby Fort Benning, home of the U.S. Army Infantry School and headquarters of the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. Fort Benning is one of the installations that will grow the most as the U.S. military begins one of the largest troop shifts in its history.

Harris County, a rural place of 29,000 residents, rolling hills and deep forests, is poised to become a bustling enclave of subdivisions as it absorbs many of the new people the shifts are expected to bring.

The armed forces are repositioning thousands of troops stateside from overseas posts and moving thousands more from installations idled by base closings approved in 2005. Eleven states are scrambling to find money to handle the growth. A top concern: where to find money to accommodate the more than 75,000 new public school students who will arrive in the next four years.

The Pentagon "does not provide funding for construction," says Chris Isleib, a Pentagon spokesman.

"I don't think there's anybody at the federal level who's doing anything but passing on the buck to somebody else," says John Deegan, chief executive of the Military Impacted Schools Association in Bellevue, Neb. "I think unless there's a federal appropriation ... what they'll do is crowd them into trailers or crowd them into portable buildings. Who'd want their children to be put in trailers?"

The communities where the military will grow acknowledge that the troop increases will boost their tax revenue. But they say there is a two- to three-year lag between the time new schools are needed and when the tax collections will be available to build them.

The 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission recommendations, which included closing 22 major installations, are the most extensive ever. In addition, the Pentagon is moving about 70,000 troops from bases in Europe to Fort Bliss in Texas and Fort Riley in Kansas as part of its strategy to streamline the military.

The moves will reshape military communities across the United States. The troops, their families and the affiliated private-sector contractors and their families will generate decades worth of growth in a few years.

Communities also are trying to build roads, expand public transit and construct housing to be ready for the growth. The Fort Meade area of Maryland expects the troop shifts to generate 22,000 federal and private-sector jobs. Fayetteville, N.C., home of Fort Bragg, expects up to 25,000 new residents and has seen a BRAC-related housing boom.

The 11 states getting additional troops — Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Virginia — are requesting \$1.1 billion in federal funds to build schools, according to the Seven Rivers National Coalition, a group of military communities.

Wave of new students

The \$3 billion BRAC budget request for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 does not include money for new schools. Philip Grone, deputy undersecretary of Defense for installations and environment, told Congress recently that Defense officials don't plan to use BRAC funds to build public schools.

That's bitter news in places such as the Geary County Unified School District 475, which serves many of the soldiers and contractors at Fort Riley. The district has 6,400 students and expects to add 2,500 more — a 40% increase in three years, Superintendent Ronald Walker says.

He estimates it will take \$42 million to build classrooms. "It'll take some doing to make it happen, but everyone understands that the increase is driven by the military," he says. "So perhaps some consideration will be given that we need some financial support."

Rep. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, senior Republican on the House Appropriations military construction and veterans affairs subcommittee, notes that the communities "spent hundreds of thousands of dollars lobbying for these extra assignments" because of their economic benefit. "I just hate to see ... the federal government getting into a lot more building of schools," he said at a hearing in late March.

Not everyone around Fort Benning is excited by the prospect of robust growth.

About 200 residents packed a town hall meeting last month to discuss a multimillion-dollar development planned for the southern end of Harris County. Many strongly opposed the project, which would be built over 20-30 years on 1,100 acres and include more than 2,000 homes and 3 million square feet of commercial space.

Those kinds of growing pains are being felt along the Georgia and Alabama sides of the Chattahoochee River. Officials say the Fort Benning expansion will generate 45,000 new residents and create 17,000 jobs in a seven-county area of the two states.

About 20,000 people, including troops and civilian contractors, will require housing off the post, according to Jay Brown, the program manager for Fort Benning's expansion. That has led to intense land speculation in the region. Developers snap up acreage and place options on other parcels. Landowners in Harris County are frequently solicited by people asking whether they want to sell.

Officials in Harris, Marion, Talbot, Muscogee and Chattahoochee counties in Georgia and Lee and Russell counties across the Chattahoochee River in Alabama are trying to decide how to provide classroom space for an additional 20,000 students — from the base expansion and normal growth — expected by 2011, says Myles Caggins, chief operations and facilities officer for the Muscogee County School District.

"The pressure grows every day," Caggins says. "It takes three years to build a school. That means we got trouble. We're in crunch time."

This part of the state has a long familiarity with military troop fluctuations. Chattahoochee County was the fastest-growing county in the nation in the 12 months that ended July 1, 2006, according to the Census Bureau, growth attributed to Fort Benning's role as a staging area for the Iraq war.

The additional growth resulting from base closings elsewhere and repositioning of U.S. troops promises to be different.

"This is not like it was before," Caggins says. "Now you're talking about when these people come here, they're going to stay. It's not like a buildup and then a drawdown."

A national icon

Fort Benning, which daily supports more than 100,000 military and civilian personnel, sprawls across 184,000 acres. It's lodged in the nation's battlefield psyche because of the generations of ground soldiers who trained there: Every time America has gone to war, Fort Benning's soldiers have led the charge.

Benning is a constant in popular culture — numerous movies have been filmed there, including John Wayne's "The Green Berets" in 1966 and "Black Hawk Down" and "We Were Soldiers," both in 2000.

Fort Benning is growing because of several factors. Among them: The Army's Armor School is moving from Fort Knox in Kentucky; several smaller Army Reserve units are being consolidated into one Benning-based unit; the Defense Department is redeploying troops from Germany to stateside bases, and the 75th Ranger Regiment is expanding, Brown says.

Columbus, like other cities in the region, is preparing for the influx. Mayor Jim Wetherington met recently with the City Council to discuss a bond issue for roads and other needs such as water and sewers. They are considering increasing the size of the police and fire departments, he says.

"This is going to be a pretty big deal for us," Wetherington says. "We think we're going to be ready, but we've got a lot of work to do."