

BRAC realignment could spur Smiths Station growth

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Despite modest growth in the city limits, greater Smiths Station's population has exploded over the past 10 years – and even more growth could be coming soon.

The greater Smiths Station area has grown by 61 percent since 2000, according to 2010 census numbers, and even more people could soon be headed there thanks to the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure plan for Fort Benning, Ga.

Because the city incorporated in 2001, Smiths Station was counted as a census-designated place with a population of 21,756 in the 2000 census. At the time of the 2010 census count, there were 35,028 residents in the Smiths Station census county division.

The U.S. Census Bureau describes census county divisions as “areas delineated by the Census Bureau in cooperation with state, tribal, and local officials for statistical purposes. CCDs have no legal function and are not governmental units.”

Growth inside the city's limits, however, wasn't as significant. Census figures show the population in incorporated Smiths Station grew to 4,926 in 2010 — only 383 people more than in April 2000 census estimates.

Multiple attempts to reach Smiths Station Mayor LaFaye Dellinger for comment were unsuccessful.

Lee County Schools Superintendent Dr. Stephen Nowlin said he's noticed the increase based on enrollment in the city's five schools.

“There was a lot of growth in the early part of the decade,” he said. “It continued, but the increase wasn't as much in the later part of the decade. We've been seeing increases almost every single year, though.”

Those increases are likely to continue as the U.S. Army's Armor School completes its relocation from Fort Knox, Ky., to Fort Benning late this summer and other BRAC changes are implemented.

Projections show 28,000 people coming to Fort Benning by the time realignment is complete, with the majority of families moving from May to July.

“That window of time in spring and summer is when we'll see a lot of movement,” said Larry Crane, project director of regional growth sustainability at The Valley Partnership Joint

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Development Authority. “Lee was projected to be a big growth area, and it has been. I think that Smiths Station has also been a hot spot there.”

The Fort Benning Regional Growth Management Plan projects 4,280 people will move to Lee County over a 20-year period due to BRAC. But it remains to be seen just how many people will come to Smiths Station.

Smiths Station City Councilman Richard “Dick” Key, who represents Place 5, said he wasn’t sure how many people might move to the city.

“Right now, there’s not many (troops) coming in, but there’ll be quite a few coming into the Lee County area,” he said.

Nowlin also said the situation wouldn’t be clear until later in the summer or even early fall.

“We really don’t know yet for sure,” he said. “They had projected 600 or 700, but I’d be surprised if we got that many.”

However, Crane said cities such as Smiths Station have one thing going for them when it comes to luring Fort Benning transplants over the state line.

“In Alabama, they don’t tax military retiree pay,” he said. “That’s an incentive to locate in Alabama.”

Fort Benning spokeswoman Elsie Jackson said BRAC is about one-third complete. The target date for completion is Sept. 15.