

Fort Benning revises BRAC growth numbers downward

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Facing budgetary constraints amid a military now downsizing from two wars, Fort Benning has sharply reduced its long-forecasted growth numbers. Instead of 28,000 new residents invading the Columbus-Phenix City area as a result of base realignment, it's now down to roughly 22,000, a post official confirmed Friday.

On top of that, George Steuber, Fort Benning's deputy garrison commander, said the U.S. Army installation is bracing for budget cuts to its existing work force. He said there are plans to "fight" projected cuts that would slash 15 percent from the post's existing civilian payroll in the 2012 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

"The numbers for this next year are absolutely frightening," Steuber said in an interview Friday, a day after returning from the U.S. Army Installation Management Command at Fort Eustis, Va., where the cuts were discussed with Lt. Gen. Rick Lynch, who leads the command. "The Army is going to be underfunding their civilian payroll by 15 percent, which means we're going to have to cut 15 percent of our work force across the Army. We know it's going to be ugly, and we're looking at those possibilities that we can see to save as many resources as possible."

There are just over 5,500 Department of the Army civilians now working on the post, which has long trained infantry soldiers for combat but is now in the final stages of relocating the U.S. Army Armor School here from Fort Knox, Ky.

The school's move was mandated by the federal government's Base Realignment and Closure review in 2005. Fort Benning has for several years forecast that the post would grow by 28,088 individuals. That includes soldiers, government civilian workers, defense contractors and their families.

Steuber said that number has been revised significantly lower because of tighter budgets, units leaving or being deactivated at the post, and the fact that the Armor School operation just constructed here is more efficient than the one that had been at Fort Knox for decades.

Whereas the Army initially thought it would take 3,255 permanent-party soldiers and 1,007 civilians to staff the school, those numbers have dropped to 2,363 soldiers -- down nearly 900 people -- and 750 civilians.

"We built three beautiful dining facilities out at Harmony Church, and right now my load is such that I only use two of them," Steuber said, noting there are only 245 more soldiers left to relocate from Fort Knox to here.

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Looking at the overall headcount for the post's projected expansion, and not counting defense contractors, Steuber said there will be about 1,700 fewer soldiers and 600 fewer government civilians than had been estimated since at least 2008. Those are 36 percent and 32 percent declines, respectively, from the original projections. The number of spouses and children also has been reduced by more than 3,600, from the original estimate of about 10,000.

That cuts the initial projection of about 28,000 down to just over 22,000 people moving to Fort Benning and the Columbus-Phenix City area by the mandated Sept. 15 deadline to wrap up BRAC-related relocations.

Making adjustments

The news left Jack Key, a partner with the largest real-estate company in Columbus, scratching his head Friday.

"That is a little disappointing. This is the very first I've heard of it," said Key of Coldwell Banker/Kennon, Parker, Duncan & Key. "I've been on the 28,000 (estimate) all along, and I've felt reasonably assured that it was going to be 28,000 all along."

"But I still want to add the caveat that I am very thankful for what we do have because we have a whole lot of new neighbors in Columbus now. If we didn't have the surge that we've experienced, then our economy would be looking a lot worse than it is."

Susan Andrews, superintendent of the Muscogee County School District, expressed "relief" that a "flood" of students would not be arriving here at one time.

The district had been told to expect as many as 4,000 new students related to Fort Benning's expansion. Andrews had asked the school board to set aside at least \$6 million to handle the influx, but had to settle for \$1 million.

There are now about 30,000 students enrolled in the system -- about the same as last year -- with new pupils trickling in, but nowhere near 4,000.

"Even in good economic times it would be a great challenge to handle an increase of 4,000 students," Andrews said. "It would be especially tough financially in a time of budget cuts."

Construction contracts

The total Fort Benning growth number could drop even lower. Steuber said his office only tracks the soldiers and government civilians working on post. The defense contractors, originally estimated to grow by 4,802, are not part of his oversight. The contractor projection included more than 2,600 spouses and nearly 4,000 children.

Gary Jones, executive vice president of economic development and military affairs at the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, does keep tabs on the contractors. He said there are now

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more than 2,000 in that category working on the installation as part of a \$3.5 billion construction blitz leading up to the BRAC deadline and through fiscal year 2016.

“You go on the assumption that at the end of 2016 there would be no more construction at Fort Benning, and I refuse to accept that,” Jones said. “I’m very comfortable that there will continue to be varying levels of construction beyond the 2016 date because it’s such an active installation.”

The other 2,800 civilian contractor jobs that have yet to materialize are connected to medical and dental commands, as well as the post’s retail infrastructure that includes post exchange stores and the commissary, Jones said.

Fort Benning is also waiting on a contract of at least \$400 million to be awarded to a contracting firm to assist the post with training and training support. The contract, good for up to five years, was expected to be awarded last October, but hasn’t yet. Jones expects that to happen by December.

Asked if the federal budget process could impact the status of that contract, Jones responded, “I could speculate, but that’s all it would be. So the best thing for me is to not comment on it.”

Fighting for every penny

Chamber President Mike Gaymon said he believes the gap between the original growth estimate and the revised numbers will narrow over the coming year.

“We know that contract’s still pending, still waiting, and that certainly has had an impact on the numbers of people here,” he said. “But we’ll have to wait and see because some of those (numbers) are best guess, best information at the time.”

Steuber, however, isn’t so certain. He sees Fort Benning and the Maneuver Center of Excellence -- which oversees the Infantry and Armor schools -- having to fight for every penny they get in the coming years as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and the United States begins cutting its budget deficits.

“Now it’s come time to pay the bill, and you know it’s going to be very lean times. We understand that,” said Steuber, a retired Army colonel who watched the same sort of budget and force downsizing after the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War.

“It’s not just the military,” he said. “I think everybody in America has to understand that we have to get our fiscal house in order and everybody’s going to have to feel some pain in that. It’s necessary so that America keeps being that bastion of freedom that we’ve been for 235 years.”

Addressing potential civilian job cuts at Fort Benning because of the 15 percent projected budget cut for 2012, Steuber said the post is working out various scenarios as it waits for Congress to approve an overall U.S. budget later this year.

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The post's overall annual budget is roughly \$500 million. That includes operations, maintenance, modernizing buildings and housing, and civilian pay. It does not include any BRAC-related work.

Steuber said he has lobbied Lynch, the general overseeing the Installation Management Command, for additional personnel to operate the post and its large mission of training soldiers and supporting an overall population of about 144,000 people over the course of a training year. The average soldier-student headcount now is nearly 18,000 a day.

The deputy garrison commander also noted Fort Benning had to cut its budget in fiscal year 2010 and has been under a virtual hiring freeze for most of the current fiscal year that ends Sept. 30.

Steuber said he hopes to save as many of the post's employees as possible from the 15-percent budget reduction -- if it comes to that -- by cutting other expenditures on post. There's also the possibility the Army may reduce budgets more at other installations, while sparing posts such as Fort Benning from more austere cuts, he said.

Time is of the essence, however, with fiscal year 2012 only about six weeks away.

"That's when they're saying you're going to have to live with the fiscal reality. You're going to have to find the money to pay for that 15 percent of your civilian work force," Steuber said.

"And that will come out of your operating funds someplace else. The operating funds are the funds that we pay our utility bill with, the funds that we do all of the other things on the garrison with.

"That's when you come down to hard choices, do I let this person go, or are we going to get the funds necessary to support that individual?"

And there's also the possibility the situation could change quickly as the military downsizes from the wars and repositions forces around the world.

In recent years, Fort Benning has lost a combat medical unit, engineer group, ordnance company and infantry battalion because of the Army's transformation into a more efficient entity, Steuber said. The post could pick up missions from other installations because it has plenty of available space for more units from those previous departures.

Though it is certainly a challenging time, Steuber said Fort Benning remains well positioned in the military's overall strategy. That's why he's reasonably confident the post can hold the line on employee layoffs on the post.

"I think we have done our homework better than any other garrison in terms of validating what our workload is and what is necessary to support the Maneuver Center of Excellence," he said.

Staff writer Larry Gierer contributed to this report.