

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Prosperity marches in

BY DAVID RESS AND MEREDITH BONNY
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITERS Jan 21, 2007

Rick Zevgolis has stacks of bowling balls still in boxes piled inside the Oaklawn Bowl on state Route 36. He's just waiting for more bowlers.

The 58-year-old manager hopes the major Fort Lee expansion will add some fresh blood to his loyal following of retirees.

"Hopewell is an old town," he said. "Getting some young people in here is going to help."

Over the next five years, a nationwide military reshuffling will bring an additional 3,500 troops and Defense Department civilians and contractors to nearby Fort Lee in Prince George County, along with more than 6,100 family members.

This new expansion is likely to turbocharge Fort Lee's economic motor, with reverberations that could echo from Emporia to north of Richmond, from Williamsburg and Surry County to rural communities west of Dinwiddie County. Multistory buildings will pop up where there are now trees on the base. In nearby communities, the expansion will mean more housing, busier roads and more jobs.

For cities and counties around the fort -- some of them economically depressed -- the expansion's impact isn't yet clear. No one can say where the newcomers will settle, making it difficult to judge the impact on any one community's schools, roads and services.

"It's like taking a bunch of marbles and throwing them and trying to figure out where they are going to land," said Prince George's county administrator, Brenda G. Garton. "There are things we have to deal with, there are problems we have to solve, but these are good problems."

But for local businesses, the growth is the news they've been waiting for.

"I think it's a good thing for business," said 19-year-old Sun Yi, who has grown up in her father's Plaza Cleaners store in the Oaklawn Plaza shopping center along Route 36 in Hopewell. The store already keeps busy with its \$5, one-day cleaning orders for military fatigues. The rack of cleaned uniforms in the shop's back room is sure to grow, her family figures.

On top of the influx of military men and women and their families, an additional 24,600 soldier, sailor and airman students each year will cycle in for short-term training on how

to get supplies and troops to the front line. That's roughly the number of students who attend Virginia Tech.

With the 13,000 troops and civilians on the base now and nearly 34,000 military students a year coming for training, Fort Lee is far and away the largest employer in the Tri-Cities area.

And every additional 10 soldiers posted to Fort Lee should generate three to five jobs in the region, said John Whaley, an economist with the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission who is recognized nationwide as an expert on the economic impact of military bases. Defense Department civilians, because their pay is higher, typically generate even more jobs.

"These impacts can take a period of time to work themselves out," Whaley said. "But you'll feel most of them in two years."

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The growth starts at the base itself.

The U.S. Army has told local business and community leaders that it expects to build \$1.5 billion worth of new facilities on the base, everything from barracks to classrooms to ammunition stores.

In addition, there will be new housing on the base for some, but not all, of the 3,500 "permanent party" arrivals.

The Army expects only about a third will live on base. At the same time, its latest housing review suggests it needs to build or renovate 1,668 housing units -- for those who stay for longer-term assignments than the trainees.

The cost of that housing depends on how much the Army ends up deciding to build and the terms it works out with the private contractor who will be responsible for building and managing on-base housing.

"We're going to be a construction zone for the next eight years or so," said Dennis K. Morris, executive director of the Crater Planning District, a regional body representing 10 local governments including all the Tri-Cities communities. "There's going to be a lot of steel going up."

And that's just the fort.

Staff members who don't live on base will need places to live. And while there is on-base shopping, all newcomers likely will be spending money in area supermarkets, stores, restaurants and entertainment venues.

"It's going to have a very substantial impact," said Jeff Kraus, market manager for Wal-Mart's operations in the Richmond area. "We're already looking at additional sites. It's on our radar screen, down in that area, to help solidify the market."

Although there are several commercial businesses along Route 36, some of the storefronts in local shopping plazas sit empty. During a recent afternoon, at least one area restaurant and a few independently owned businesses were dark and empty.

Those who work here say they expect that to change quickly. There are new hotels where Route 36 meets Interstate 295, and some local business owners think more are sure to come.

Anastasia Skordas, a 26-year-old assistant manager at Rosa's Italian Ristorante Pizzeria along Route 36, is one of the local business managers eager for the expansion.

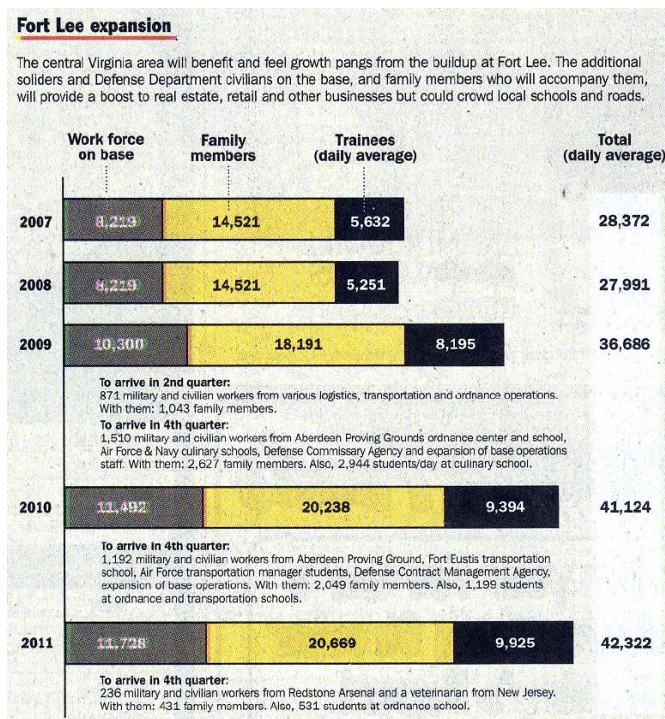
"I don't just look at it as more business, but guaranteed business," she said.

The restaurant's homemade calzones, pizzas and sandwiches already draw a big lunchtime crowd, including many men and women in camouflage from the nearby base. "It's like a swarm of bees in here at 11:30 a.m.," Skordas said.

She hopes the influx of military families who soon move here will think of Rosa's as "my pizzeria."

Sgt. 1st Class Robert Garza and Sgt. Melissa Guerrero already do. They work on base and are hoping the expansion will help the economy and provide them with more choices.

"We need more stuff," said Guerrero, a mother of two young boys. "Especially for children -- something like a Chuck E. Cheese's."



Riley E. Ingram, owner of Hopewell's Ingram and Associates, says he's never seen anything like the area's emerging real estate boom since he first got into the business 38 years ago. Thousands of new housing units could be constructed in the area around Fort Lee in the coming years.

Ingram, a Republican who represents Hopewell in the House of Delegates, is investing \$1.4 million to build 24 one-bedroom apartments on state Route 156 in Prince George, just outside

Hopewell and about 5 miles from the base. He thinks the Tri-Cities area will be able to house the newcomers without bumping rents higher, though he believes rents on newer properties in the Tri-Cities could rise to Chesterfield County levels, with new one bedrooms likely in the range of \$700 to \$750 a month instead of the current \$550 to \$600 range.

Richmond-based Weinstein Properties is planning an even bigger investment: a 234-unit garden-apartment complex in Petersburg.

"It wouldn't be happening if not for Fort Lee," said Ivan Jecklin, executive vice president and general counsel.

Petersburg City Manager B. David Canada is already seeing developers scrambling to build off-base housing.

In addition to Weinstein, developers in Petersburg plan to convert a downtown commercial building into 112 units and to build a couple of hundred more units on South Crater Road.

These developers have filed preliminary plans for the projects, the first of a stack of building, wiring, plumbing and fire-prevention plans that the city must approve. Another developer has approached the city seeking a rezoning along U.S 460 to put up roughly 350 units, Canada said.

Petersburg has more open land zoned for multi-family housing than other jurisdictions around Fort Lee, although one developer is also looking for permission to build a 300-plus unit apartment complex in Dinwiddie County, said County Administrator W. Kevin Massengill.

So far, Prince George hasn't seen a significant increase in building permit requests, while officials in Colonial Heights and Hopewell expect the impact on housing and retail will be mainly reflected in redevelopment and renovation.

Most local officials say it's too soon to say whether they'll need to build additional schools or roads.

But at least one county isn't waiting for the growth to come to them. They're already trying to woo new residents.

Russell Harris, Chesterfield's ombudsman and manager of community development, has helped create plans to sell the county to newcomers in the hopes that they'll settle in Chesterfield and not one of the other localities close to Fort Lee.

Some of those plans include hosting job fairs to attract civilians to Chesterfield, as well as hosting a training seminar locally for contractors so that they can become federally certified as vendors to work on the proposed 1.6 million-square-foot expansion planned

at the base. The county has also put together a brochure touting Chesterfield, its schools and other local draws in the Richmond area.

"The county sees this as a golden opportunity for business," Harris said. "It's an economic development opportunity, instead of just a question of how many folks are going to come here."