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City leaders seek outside insights to address BRAC-driven growth

San Antonio Business Journal - by [Catherine Dominguez](#)

Local leaders are looking to representatives of Fairfax County, Va., to help develop ideas on the best way to deal with the effect the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) action will have on San Antonio.

Kara Hill, military liaison for Bexar County, met with Mark Canale, BRAC coordinator for Fairfax County, last month in Virginia to gather ideas on how to deal with increased vehicle traffic around expanding military installations located in residential areas. Among the topics of focus in the meeting were the use of mass transit and road expansions.

Like San Antonio, Fairfax County will gain several new military missions as a result of the BRAC decision. And, like the Alamo City, most of those changes will happen around an Army installation.

According to Hill, Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County, Va., will see an influx of about 19,000 additional military and civilian personnel. San Antonio will see a jump of 11,000.

"(Fort Belvoir) is obviously in a metropolitan area where people will be commuting and a lot of (that area) is built out, similar to Fort Sam Houston," Hill says.

Hill also points out that like Fort Sam Houston, Fort Belvoir is located near two major highways.

"There are a lot of similarities between the two locations," she says. "That is one reason we are visiting with them."

Canale says each community brings vital information to the table.

"San Antonio is one of the model cities in terms of how they are organized," he says. "They have the city involved, the county involved, they have the economic development piece and a task force to respond to BRAC."

Making connections

Hill says there are 19 communities across the nation that are gaining missions due to the BRAC decision. Because many of those communities are in rural areas, they are not facing the burden of major transportation issues.

However, she says, Fairfax County and San Antonio are large metropolitan areas with similar concerns. In fact, Fort Belvoir is the second largest BRAC action, in terms of numbers, behind Fort Bliss near El Paso.

Although the BRAC action will affect Lackland Air Force Base, Randolph Air Force Base, Brooks City-Base and Camp Bullis, most of the changes are centered around Fort Sam Houston.

Hill says one of the city's biggest challenges is the projected increase in traffic around the Army installation, which is already congested.

The main projects taking place in San Antonio will be the renovation of Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) to handle in-patient hospital care and civilian trauma care and the conversion of Wilford Hall Medical Center into an ambulatory care clinic that will focus on outpatient care.

The military is also consolidating its medical training programs for all military branches at Fort Sam Houston. All BRAC projects are scheduled to be complete by 2011.

According to a 2007 study coordinated by the San Antonio-Bexar County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), some of the key points of focus of Fort Sam Houston include addressing cut-through traffic in the neighborhoods near the installation, introducing mass transit in the area, and improving street maintenance that could help the flow of traffic.

"There are going to be 11,000 people in and out of the base every day," Hill says. "We really want to minimize those traffic concerns."

Hill says one way Fairfax County is dealing with traffic in and around Fort Belvoir is using mass transit, such as buses, vanpools and carpools.

Hill notes that along with some road and bridge improvements near Fort Sam Houston, exploring the use of more public transportation could be an answer to congestion in that area of the base.

Being prepared

According to Canale, Fairfax County has a population of just more than 1 million. He adds that because Fort Belvoir has historically been an active, fast-growing military installation, community leaders have worked with military leaders to prepare for growth, even before the BRAC action.

He says that although his community did not organize a group or task force to deal specifically with the BRAC action, the community has been able to handle the transition through its normal development process.

"Fairfax County used its existing planning and development structure already in place instead of setting up a separate structure to deal with BRAC," he says. "We did add six positions to deal with the workload, but we are doing all within our normal processes."

Canale says that he, along with Fairfax County leaders, were impressed with San Antonio's efforts in organizing the City of San Antonio Office of Military Affairs and the San Antonio Military Transformation Task Force.

Hill says San Antonio and Bexar County representatives do plan to make another trip to Virginia in the future as the two communities continue to communicate about how each community is handling its growth.

"It is hugely important," Hill says. "Prior to the 2005 BRAC, all the changes had been closures, so this BRAC is historic since it involves so much growth."

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