

Jobs march, fly into Pensacola area

The Army is marching into Northwest Florida, long a hotbed of Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force personnel.

The 7th Special Forces Group is being relocated from Fort Bragg, N.C., to Eglin Air Force Base in Okaloosa County, bringing about 2,200 soldiers and their 3,800 dependents to Florida's Gulf Coast by September.

Add to that an expected influx of about 1,500 airmen and their 2,500 dependents to Eglin as a result of the Department of Defense establishing its first F-35 Lightning II training wing at the base.

That mean means 10,000 new Northwest Florida residents in 2011.

And it's also the best jobs news for this area as the new year begins. Not just the jobs that the soldiers and airmen will fill. But the additional jobs that must be created to accommodate the needs of all the new residents.

Unemployment still hovers between 10 percent and 11.6 percent, and there are at least 23,500 people unemployed in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties.

Most of the new residents are expected to live in Okaloosa and Santa Rosa counties, but there will be spillover to Escambia County.

"There will be a direct effect on the Pensacola Metropolitan Area as a result of that move," said Jim Hizer, CEO of the Pensacola Bay Area Chamber of Commerce.

"They're bringing in 500 soldiers every month. And they're bringing their families. You're talking about 1,000 people a month moving to Northwest Florida. There's going to be an effect on housing. Small business is going to feel it. Secondary jobs will be created as a result."

More Families, More Jobs

The military additions at Eglin will create 3,389 secondary jobs across Northwest Florida this year and a projected 4,279 new jobs by 2015, according to a study by the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida.

The heaviest gains will be in construction (422 new jobs this year), retail services (910 new jobs) and business and financial management (363 new jobs).

The 7th Special Forces Group is expected to complete its move into Northwest Florida by Sept. 15.

"We're looking at 100 to 150 families moving into Santa Rosa County," said Pete Gandy, Team Santa Rosa's military affairs consultant. "Some are already here and looking for homes. And some of the dependents will be looking for jobs. And their addition will create jobs as well."

Jim Breitenfeld of the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County said the Army's move into Eglin will have a projected \$506 million impact on Northwest Florida this year, rising to more than \$560 million by 2016.

According to an Economic Development Council study, each new soldier will have a \$230,000 annual impact on Northwest Florida.

"By the year 2015, there will be many more jobs," Breitenfeld said, adding that those jobs are in addition to the military positions moving to Eglin. "It's a good thing. There's no negative that we can see at all."

Hizer said Escambia County also will see an economic impact.

"Dollars travel more than any of us realize," Hizer said. "Folks who earn in Okaloosa spend their money in downtown Pensacola. It's a huge deal for all of Northwest Florida."

Boost In Private Sector

In the private sector, job creation is less conspicuous, though there are a few bright spots:

n The brightest spot is Navy Federal Credit Union, where the 230,000-square-foot Building No. 4 is scheduled to open in the spring.

"We currently have 1,674 employees on campus, and we have just over 109 new budgeted positions for 2011," said Janice Kilgore, business operations manager for the credit union. "It will be a minimal number this year, but things are looking good."

n Global Business Solutions, a Pensacola-based IT support services and technical training company, will add about 40 jobs this year, not a small number for a high-paying company that employs 60 people.

"I put nine to work this week," said CEO Randy Ramos. "We're not adding 1,000 jobs, but it's a significant amount for a company our size."

Ramos said he expects growth to continue.

"We have the opportunity to exceed that," he said. "We're a humble company. But we've been blessed."

n The Studer Group, a nationally lauded health-care consulting company, will add 20 to 22 positions this year.

They range from administrative positions, which start at \$35,000 per year, to executive positions in the \$120,000 to \$160,000 range, said Debbie Ritchie, Studer Group operations leader.

"When the economic downturn hit, we reacted aggressively to those changes," Ritchie said. "We're feeling good about our continued growth."

Hizer said Northwest Florida is better off than the rest of the state.

"The economic downturn affected central and south Florida to a greater extent than it did Northwest Florida for a variety of reasons," he said. "Therefore, as the economic recovery picks up steam over the next two years, we'll have a much more shallow hole to climb out of."