

Fort Gordon: Study looks at use of land

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By **Jeremy Craig** | *Staff Writer*

Monday, July 25, 2005

It has a fairly unexciting-sounding name: "Joint Land Use Study."

But for Fort Gordon's future, the phrase means making plans to keep development beyond its gates from putting the brakes on its activities inside the wire.

The CSRA Regional Development Center will seek public comment next month on the draft version of the study, which was released last week.

The study, embarked upon by the governments of Richmond, Columbia, McDuffie and Jefferson counties and by Fort Gordon, addresses encroachment.

"What we wanted to do was measure the extent of the encroachment problem," said Costa Pappis, senior planner for the center.

Encroachment is defined as anything that could constrain the military's ability to carry out its missions, said retired Army Col. Thom Tuckey, the executive director of the CSRA Alliance for Fort Gordon, which has worked to keep the post off this year's base-closure list.

Civilian development on a post's edges could be considered encroachment if it generates many complaints, such as noise.

The military responds to complaints by trying to mitigate the causes. With noise, that often means cutting back on artillery firings or changing flight paths.

"They could technically say, 'You guys have to live with that,'" Mr. Tuckey said, "but they don't want to do that because they want... to exist in a friendly environment, and exist in partnership with the community."

Fort Gordon, the study says, has little noise or other encroachment impeding on military missions, but that could change.

Unlike an air base - with the loud roar of aircraft streaking over homes and businesses far from the installation - Fort Gordon's loud noises come from the artillery impact areas in the post's southern regions.

Those noise zones are mostly confined to the post itself, extending less than a mile off-post. Those areas are away from the post's built-up, or "cantonment," area, and are nestled among forests and rural land that is sparsely populated.

Also mentioned in the study is a lesser encroachment issue - smoke from controlled burns on parts of Fort Gordon's thousands of acres of forest land.

The controlled burns are designed to reduce fuel for forest fires, keep wildlife under control, and preserve the habitat of the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species.

Thinning out overgrown forests with controlled burns helps to maintain an open, parklike environment that the woodpecker uses as its habitat, says the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"No. 1, you don't want to end up with a situation where 50,000 acres are suddenly burning and the fire's approaching the city of Augusta," said Mr. Tuckey, who once served as garrison commander at the post - a position comparable to a civilian city administrator.

Mr. Tuckey said that during his time as garrison commander, one controlled burn went a bit awry. The wind direction shifted, and smoke went along the ground into trailer parks near the post - some abutting the post's fences - prompting complaints about the smoke around people's homes.

"It was a lot of negative publicity for the installation," he said.

JUST BECAUSE encroachment isn't a huge problem at Fort Gordon now doesn't mean it won't happen.

"We're in an odd position of not having to deal with serious problems, so some of the solutions might not seem overly regulatory," Mr. Pappis said.

The solution to preventing encroachment lies not in zoning, but in planning recommendations, he said.

The report recommended several measures local governments should adopt to reduce encroachment.

"You've got to pick through it, but it's got some good recommendations, and we're going to try to follow up on them," said George Patty, the executive director of Augusta Planning & Zoning.

Much of Richmond County's growth around Fort Gordon has been in the Tobacco Road area near Gate 5, Mr. Patty said. Other areas around Deans Bridge Road have remained predominantly forested or agricultural.

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Mr. Patty said officials are also looking to require larger minimum lot sizes in some of the agriculturally zoned land in south Richmond County in order to slow down sprawl and high-density developments.

"There's a lot of land down there," he said, "and we're certainly not promoting that kind of development. It's difficult to service" with infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines.

Jeff Browning, the director of Columbia County's Planning and Development Department, said he has asked his staff to take a look at the study, to make the county's growth management plan consistent with some of the recommendations in the study.

Though growth in the Grovetown area is next to the fort and has been a hot area for development recently, the county's growth management plan does not call for significant, high-density growth near the post, Mr. Browning said.

There is already a tool in Georgia law to help avoid encroachment problems.

Under a state law passed in 2003, two years before the first BRAC list was released, local civilian governments must give nearby base commanders the option to voice their opinions and concerns about any planned zoning changes within 3,000 feet of their installations.

WHY WORRY ABOUT encroachment now that Fort Gordon is safe from the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure round?

Because Fort Gordon's future looked safer after the BRAC list release in May, officials have said they want to attract new missions to the fort from overseas and elsewhere.

New missions would mean more economic growth for the Augusta area, they say. But if unchecked, encroachment could threaten this goal.

"If development around the installation hinders (the Army's) ability to perform missions, then some of those missions they're currently doing could likely be moved elsewhere," Mr. Tuckey said. "Or, it could prevent future missions from being moved here."

And there's likely to be another BRAC down the road, Mr. Tuckey said.

"Undoubtedly, there will be another base closure round after the Iraq war is over" and the Overseas Basing Commission's reduction of military infrastructure abroad is completed, Mr. Tuckey said.

"Until both of those missions are completed, they will maintain more than they probably need, and won't know exactly what they need until all those units are back."

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HAVE YOUR SAY

The CSRA Regional Development Center, which performed the Joint Land Use Study, is seeking public comment on it. Comments can be sent to:

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The Joint Land Use Study's recommendations for local governments to adopt include:

- λ Adopting public noise and smoke disclosures in noise zones and within a one-mile radius of Fort Gordon's boundaries
- λ Guiding development away from noise zones, and promoting new development in urban and suburban areas already served by vital infrastructure, instead of building from scratch in some of the rural areas around the post
- λ Providing "noise contour," or noise level, data in parcel mapping available to the public; both Columbia and Richmond counties have parcel mapping online
- λ Updating local planning documents to include the study's considerations

The recommendations for Fort Gordon include:

- λ Modeling the effects of smoke

- λ Notifying local media about controlled burns and scheduled activity on the training ranges
- λ Coordinating with local governments and keeping the public informed about operational changes that cause noise or smoke

READ IT ONLINE

Read the complete draft of the Joint Land Use Study, including maps, in Adobe PDF format, at www.csrardc.org/jlus.

From the Monday, July 25, 2005 printed edition of the Augusta Chronicle