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BRAC: Getting a Grip on the 'Jello' Factor

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Right now, it appears that some 21,000 Department of Defense employees — military personnel and civilians — will be heading this way under the BRAC recommendations within the next six years.

But what is not known is where these employees live today, whether they will commute from there or follow their jobs to Fort Belvoir or its Engineer Proving Grounds, and, if so, how many children they have who will be entering Fairfax County Public Schools.

"That, for us, is critical," says Mount Vernon District Supervisor Gerry Hyland.

Thursday, the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens' Associations held a meeting, cosponsored by the Mount Vernon Council of Citizens Associations, at Whitman Middle School on the impact of the DoD's Base Realignment and Closure recommendations for Fort Belvoir which became law Nov. 9.

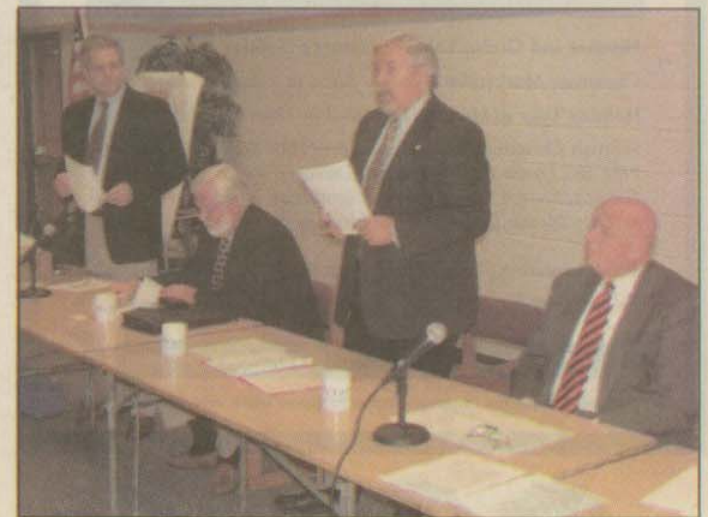
Hyland, a panelist at the meeting, first thanked FCFA president John Jennison for hosting a federation meeting in Mount Vernon, the first Hyland could recall in his 18 years as Mount Vernon supervisor.

"We're thrilled that you're here to talk about Fort Belvoir and BRAC," Hyland said.

With that, however, Hyland went on to explain how it's been frustrating for him as a county supervisor to get his hands on the "bowl of Jello" known as BRAC.

"That's how I feel about what's happened," Hyland said.

Hyland was referring to the fact that when the BRAC recommendations were released about six months ago, the number of employees slated for Fort Belvoir was



Staff photo/Steve Hunt

From left, John Jennison, Gary Chevalier, Errol Bergsagel, and Sup. Gerry Hyland at Thursday's BRAC meeting.

12,000, then 16,000, then 18,000 and now 21,000.

The changing numbers and lack of information regarding the future employees at post makes it hard not only for Hyland, Lee District Supervi-

sor Dana Kauffman and Fairfax County staff to get a handle on planning for the future transportation infrastructure needs, but Fairfax County Public Schools' needs as well.

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Dan Storck, Mount Vernon representative on the Fairfax County School Board, a panelist at the meeting, told Fort Belvoir BRAC Implementation team leader Lee Marshall, also a panelist at the meeting, that FCPS needs to know now what the approximate numbers will be so that the school system will be ready for the anticipated influx of students in five years.

"We need data," said Storck, adding that that information is necessary to assess the impact on school capacity.

Within days of the BRAC announcement in May, Hyland and Kauffman asked Fort Belvoir officials to conduct a survey of the employees asking them those three basic questions.

Six months later, while a survey has been sent out, the response has been sparse and no preliminary data has been provided to the county.

Hyland asked how and when will the county get the information it needs to begin its planning.

"If we don't get that information," Hyland said, Storck's and the county's "hands are tied. It's all rigged by the numbers."

Hyland stressed that the numbers are needed "sooner rather than later if we are to have adequate schools for you."

Marshall estimated that less than 10 percent of the potential future

employees have responded to the survey, which he stated takes about three minutes to complete.

And when asked by the Voice why the DoD could not require military personnel and DoD civilian contractor employees to complete the survey within a 24 or 48 hour period, Marshall said the employees would most likely refuse to do so citing privacy issues.

Marshall said the DoD and Army cannot "force" its employees and contract personnel to respond to such a survey so they are relying solely on those who voluntarily do so.

Hyland also questioned Marshall about the need for federal dollars for off-post transportation infrastructure improvements and whether the Army was going to be willing to step up to the plate in a timely manner to prevent major gridlock around the post when the employees do start coming.

Hyland estimated that a "quick list" of necessary improvements would cost \$350 million.

Hyland stressed that BRAC "cannot work" unless those improvements are in place as BRAC is implemented over the next six years.

"That's the challenge we have," Hyland said.

What also makes it hard presently for county planners, such as Fairfax County Department of Transportation planner Mark Canale who

was in attendance, is that Fort Belvoir has not yet decided where these new employees will be located on post and the EPG.

"We don't have that yet," Hyland said.

Plus, on top of the BRAC employees, Hyland also pointed out that the southern portions of the Mount Vernon and Lee districts are already the fastest growing section of Fairfax County with an expected 27,000 new residents in the next few years.

Marshall said he was glad to have the opportunity to address the "Jello problem" and explained that as the BRAC process moves forward, the numbers could continue to grow or shrink from the original numbers.

Marshall stressed that Fort Belvoir officials are just as concerned as the surrounding community about the impact on the transportation infrastructure off post as that affects how personnel will get to and from Fort Belvoir.

Hyland also questioned how the new large hospital slated for Fort Belvoir, or its EPG site, will impact traffic infrastructure needs along with the National Museum for the U.S. Army to be located at Fort Belvoir and asked about projected trip generations for the two facilities.

Hyland expressed concern that it doesn't appear that the Army is
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expediting its standard procedure for identifying infrastructure needs in light of BRAC.

Marshall said another survey will be going out later in an attempt to get a baseline and to refine data.

Bob Brubaker, a local citizen activist concerned about pedestrian and transit matters, questioned why, with the massive impact BRAC will have on the community, doesn't the DoD simply go ahead with a plan to improve infrastructure.

"Why not just recognize this elephant?" asked Brubaker.

"Thank you," Hyland interjected, adding, "We should start tomorrow to make these improvements happen."

Marshall said there is no way the DoD would start on any plan for transportation improvements without study first.

Hyland noted that study, and following the normal process, could delay infrastructure improvements for years before construction begins and the improvements are completed.

"BRAC will not work if we follow that process," Hyland said, adding that they must be able "to cut through that process."

Mount Vernon Transportation Commissioner Earl Flanagan pointed out that at a recent county transportation meeting, maps were presented showing that a plan which might incorporate heavy rail and light rail might be feasible.

Monday, Fort Belvoir announced that the Army is seeking private-sector expertise to assist in developing a plan to provide for a net influx of 21,000 employees at Fort Belvoir.

A request for bids from master developers was released Monday by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Army estimates construction of about six million square feet of new space and upgrade of on-post infrastructure to comply with BRAC law.

Fort Belvoir garrison commander Col. Brian W. Lauritzen stated that he is proud Fort Belvoir has been identified as a flagship installation vital to the nation's security.

"This is the beginning of a major transition and we are committed to a process that works for everyone who will be impacted, including local residents," Lauritzen said Monday. "We cannot — and will not — ignore the concerns and needs of the surrounding community. And we will continue to seek their input and keep them informed throughout the process."

Hyland had a dire prediction about what will happen if federal, state, local and DoD and Army officials don't resolve these issues now in order to be prepared for those 21,000 employees in the next few years.

"You will have one hell of a mess here in Mount Vernon," Hyland said. "You don't want it and I don't want it."