

# Bragg expansion means opportunities for county

By Bob Shiles, The Robesonian (NC), January 16, 2008

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*More than 300 local people elected officials, and business and community leaders gathered Tuesday to hear Paul R. Dordal, executive director of the Base Realignment and Closure Regional Task Force. (Robesonian photo by Steve Humbert)*

**LUMBERTON — As growth at Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base gears up, Robeson County is preparing for the impact — mostly believed to be beneficial — that the addition of as many as 40,000 military personnel and families will mean to it and 10 other nearby counties.**

More than 300 local people — elected officials, and business and community leaders — gathered Tuesday to hear Paul R. Dordal, executive director of the Base Realignment and Closure Regional Task Force. The task force is helping the 11 counties and their 73 municipalities coordinate a regional planning effort to handle economic growth opportunities.

**“Linking people to jobs — that’s what this is really all about,” Dordal said.** “The significant growth that is projected for this region, combined with the U.S. Army Forces Command and Army Reserve Command headquarters move to Fort Bragg, will be the catalyst to transform the regional economy and workforce in this area from reliance on declining industries — such as textile manufacturing and agriculture — to meeting the needs of emerging defense related companies with higher paying, higher technology positions.”

The theme for the day was more — jobs, people, money, opportunities.

Charles Chrestman, president of Robeson Community College, one of several sponsors for the event, said Robeson County residents who have lost textile, manufacturing or

agricultural jobs need to acquire new skills so they can take advantage of the new opportunities.

“This is not as easy as it sounds,” Chrestman said. “The trick is that people have to set aside time to get educated in the skills employers are looking for when they need to hire.”

“There is a lot of different work being created. But people have to adapt and learn a new set of skills to be part of it.”

**Ken Windley, county manager for Robeson County, pointed to defense industry jobs that will be created by growth at Bragg.**

**“People will have to prepare for these defense industry jobs — jobs that are high paying,” Windley said. “I think there is a lot of opportunity for the region to get new jobs.”**

Dordal and other task force staff members briefly outlined the changes that will affect Robeson and surrounding counties as the additional military personnel and their families, as well as those businesses and services necessary to maintain the growing population as it floods the area.

The changes will affect everything from housing, roads, airports, workforce and infrastructure to public safety, medical services and quality of life.

Robeson County, task force members added, will benefit greatly from its physical location in the “All American Defense Corridor” — a new defense and homeland security sector created in September to provide 21st century jobs to state residents.

The corridor, which serves as the foundation for establishing a defense industry in North Carolina, links military bases — Fort Bragg, Pope Air Force Base, Camp Lejeune, New River, Cherry Point and Seymour-Johnson Air Force — with defense-related businesses and research and development centers, including Research Triangle Park and the state’s progressive university and community college systems.

“We want to market and promote this area to get defense industry businesses to come into the area,” Dordal said. “There are opportunities for prime contracts, partnerships, subcontracts and suppliers.”

John Harbison, task force deputy director, said that most of the area’s residential growth spurred by additional military personnel at Fort Bragg will be in the northern part of the county. He said that military personnel stated in a survey that

if they have their choice, they want to reside in Parkton, St. Pauls or the Lumber Bridge areas.

Dordal said that over the next few years the impact of base realignments and closures will transform the economy of the region. It is “essential,” he said, that there be involvement from public officials and community and business leaders.

State Sen. David Weinstein echoed Dordal’s remarks.

**“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented to us,” Weinstein said. “Now is the time to act. We don’t want to wait around.”**