

Partners plead for 5th

Officials petition DoD to proceed with plans for new BCT

By Frenchi Jones
 fjones@coastalcourier.com

Concerns that the 5th Brigade Combat Team might not be stationed here with the 3rd Infantry Division dominated Tuesday's meeting of the Fort Stewart Growth Management Partnership.

During the meeting, Hinesville Mayor Jim Thomas urged the partnership and its members' constituents to contact Georgia lawmakers, asking them to rally support for the projected stationing of a 5th BCT here.

"We are not sure that Fort Stewart will possibly see a reduction of that

brigade, but we cannot take that for granted. We have to go forward as if it is going to happen ...," Thomas said.

Fort Stewart officials said they, too, are continuing to operate as if the added troops are coming.

Last week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates proposed a budget

that would limit the number of the Army's brigade combat teams, possibly reducing the number from 48, as originally proposed, to 45.

Officials said Fort Stewart was likely to grow even without a new brigade, but no where near the

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10,000 soldiers, dependants and support personnel that would come with the brigade.

The mayor said he and the Liberty County Commission Chairman John McIver had already written lawmakers asking them to urge Gates to stay the course with the proposed team at the fort.

"We've given them the amount of money that has been spent by our developers, our contractors, our bankers and our local communities in preparation for that 5th brigade, and we have also told them about how we can support that brigade as far as infrastruc-

ture is concerned," Thomas said. "So we are in the process of trying to show the Army that we are providing the level of support that they cannot and will not receive at other places."

Thomas and McIver left for Washington, D.C., on Wednesday to lobby their efforts. They were scheduled to return yesterday, but neither were available for comment before press time.

Despite Gates' proposed cuts, Col. Todd Buchs, Fort Stewart's garrison commander, said the Army is still looking at all its options, but Fort Stewart remains a "premiere power projection platform" and

its leaders intend, until told otherwise, to continue with all scheduled projects.

"The one thing that has not changed is that we have been told to continue to drive on with all of our plans, all of our developments and that's exactly what we've done. We have not turned anything off, everything is in full motion," he said during the meeting.

In June, Buchs said, the fort plans to continue with its groundbreaking ceremony for additions to the post's cantonment area that will be dedicated to the 5th BCT and their families.

So far, the DOD has allocated an estimated \$430 million to Fort Stewart for construction projects to prepare for the troops' arrival.

It is the second largest

appropriation of money for fiscal year 2009, behind funds allocated to Fort Bliss, Texas.

Former Hinesville Mayor Tom Ratcliffe, who represents the Georgia Military Affairs Committee on the partnership, said he hopes the administration will not let the relocation of the brigade get lost in a "political shuffle."

"We need not to let this become a budget issue," he said. "It's really about the quality of life the soldiers and their families."

"The idea is that it's not just an issue of money. Nationally, we need to keep our eye on the service and the men and women that do them.

"And we're uniquely set as being shovel-ready ..."