

# Mayor: City ready to grow by a fourth

By **Andrea Washington**  
awashington@coastalcourier.com

The countdown to the start of Fort Stewart's troop buildup has begun and Hinesville Mayor Jim Thomas said the city "is in fine shape" to handle the estimated 25 percent population surge expected to hit the county in three years.

Addressing business leaders during the Liberty County Chamber of Commerce's Progress Through People luncheon last week, Thomas said Hinesville is being proactive in

preparing for growth coming to the city as a result of the fort's expansion.

Nearly 4,000 new troops are due to arrive at the base in 2011 when the 3rd Infantry Division gains a new infantry brigade combat team as part of the Army's plan to become a lighter, more modular fighting force.

Add military dependents to that number and the estimated immediate population impact of the additional brigade easily dwarfs that of the last troop buildup on the installation, the mayor said.

"I haven't worked on Fort Stewart for a lot of years, but the last increase in troops that we had in 2004 — I was deeply involved in that — it included about 4,000 people. We were able to take care of a lot of that on Fort Stewart," Thomas said. "This time we're talking about 12,900 people, almost 13,000 people. And that is a very conservative number because it can only reflect those people that the Army can be absolutely sure of."

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Hinesville Mayor Jim Thomas discusses the growth expected to hit the city as Chamber of Commerce Chairwoman Kim Thomas and Keep Liberty County Beautiful Sara Swida listen.

# Grow

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The mayor, a former project manager on Fort Stewart, said post officials are planning to build approximately 1,000 new homes to take care of soldiers and their families, which only equals about 20 percent of the actual need.

Formally, the family figure the Army uses is 2.6 persons to a household. That's going to be about 2,600 people that they're going to be able to put into homes," Thomas said. "That leaves 10,000 (people to house)."

Once contractors and other civilian employees are accounted for, he added, the real number of new residents who will need housing could be "closer to 12,000 or 14,000 people."

Acknowledging some of these people may move to other parts of Liberty County or even to

Long and Bryan counties, Thomas said Hinesville "is going to absorb most of these people" and is ready to do so from both a housing and infrastructure standpoint.

The mayor said city officials anticipate most of the growth will be concentrated along 15th Street, where nearly 10,000 living units are being built in new, upscale subdivisions.

There is currently no retail in the area, but Thomas said those plans are being worked on as officials recognize the potential it has to become a new city hub.

"We're going to need to see and want to see retail development happening along 15th Street because to have almost four miles of road and houses and little retail is just not a good way to start a city or a develop-

ment," he said. "Because essentially what we're going to have is a new city center and that new city center is going to be over on 15th Street."

Thomas quickly reassured business owners the creation of a new city center will not detour progress on the current downtown district, especially the realignment of Memorial Drive.

"We're going to maintain downtown in as best fashion as we can and one of the ways we're going to do that is through the renovation, widening and alteration of Memorial Drive," he said. "We hope to have that done in 18 months."

The realignment project will create a direct link from Highway 84 to the heart of downtown's commercial district and to Fort Stewart, which city leaders

hope will attract more residents and give them easier access to the area.

Both Hinesville and Fort Stewart administrators believe one of the highlights of the project, which broke ground last week, will be the creation of "a slightly upscale dining experience," Thomas said.

The mayor said planners would like to build a new restaurant "like a Macaroni's, Carrabba's or Olive Garden" at the end of Memorial Drive.

"(Fort Stewart's) in negotiations now with the company who's done this in Norfolk, Va., and several other military installations," Thomas said, adding civilians will have access to the restaurant. "We think that's going to come to fruition very quickly."