

BRAC Barometer

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aBRACadabra: The “Magical” Effect of Transformation

Five years ago paints a different scenario of Base Realignment and Closure in Harford County, Maryland. From a community perspective, there was talk of a lot of people coming to work “over there behind the gate”; from the Army Alliance perspective, it was strategic planning to retain mission and advocacy for preserving the tenant organizations at Aberdeen Proving Ground; for municipal, county and state officials it was marketing and showcasing quality of life that made “MarylandReady” = BRAC ready. With the announcement of the BRAC 2005 decision-- that APG would be one of 25 growth communities across the US—the largest civilian DoD population increase in the nation and be accompanied by a defense contractor tail that would roughly double that of government jobs-- came jubilation and denial, opportunities and challenges. Perception was the reality of choice: public education was inferior in Maryland and lacking academic rigor; healthcare choices were limited and deficient in specialized services; APG was in the middle of nowhere, and there was no beach. As a result, initial assessments of existing personnel in jobs that would be transferring indicated only 20% would relocate with their jobs to the APG community.

Fast forward five years later to today. We can look back at several significant efforts that served as a catalyst for change: Harford County’s BRAC Planning Advisory Commission which was proactive in identifying infrastructure and transportation needs and engaging neighboring counties; the Chesapeake Science and Security Corridor (CSSC) Consortium which evolved into a collaborative regional planning effort among three states in eight jurisdictions in support of BRAC implementation at APG; and an installation that engaged the community to prepare for the largest economic boom the region has seen since World War II. The Army Alliance remains ever vigilant in ensuring the mission continues at APG and supports both the BRAC transformation and the organic growth occurring among the installation’s 70 tenant organizations. Our municipal, county and state officials continue to tout quality of life and demonstrate that commitment in investing in school construction; water and sewer services and providing a business-friendly environment that has made 29 defense contractors call this community home. We have college presidents and advanced development and engineering directors conversing over coffee; workforce investment board directors and DoD civilian personnel reps discussing job skill sets and internships; senior level commanders engaging school superintendents and economic development officials to align goals in a unified vision. And as for the community, you don’t hear “over there behind the gate” too much anymore. You hear ‘STEM education’, ‘workforce training’, ‘acquisition and contracting’, ‘technology campus.’ In fact, some can actually recite that C4ISR stands for ‘Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance’.

Hospitality has played a big role in transformation. Through motorcoach tours, relocation fairs, community tours, we've engaged BRAC affected personnel and their families—inviting them into our communities, our neighborhoods, our schools, our networks. We've equipped them with information and resources to make informed choice. We've introduced them to a public education system that ranks top in the nation, to quality community hospitals, and world-class healthcare institutions in the region offering a wide range of specialized services. We've demonstrated professionalism, empathy and a welcoming invitation to join our community. The decision to move one's job, family and roots is not an easy one, and the state of the economy has brought additional pressure on such a personal decision. Reception has not been solely responsible, but has had an impact; nearly 60% of personnel are now anticipated to relocate.

BRAC didn't make these transformation efforts happen; BRAC expedited the timeframe in which they needed to occur. Already a growing area, 15 years of planning had to occur in just a few. It doesn't come without sacrifice, but it is a sign of progress for a growing defense community. Everyone expected to see an influx of people and change. Instead we see subtle, but persistent signs of progress each day (i.e, new partnerships, a groundbreaking, a ribbon cutting, and let's not forget Wegman's!) As new residents move to the area, they are finding their favorite dining spots, a place to shop, a park to enjoy with kids or grandkids. They find it's not so country. Just comfy. As for the beach...we don't pretend to tout our majestic Chesapeake Bay as the beach. For all its assets of recreation and fine seafood, we wouldn't attempt to personify the Jersey Shore. We simply encourage you to pick your zip code, get to know the region and enjoy those daytrips when you're craving the Atlantic. We do it too!