

Introduction

The development of the Tri-County Growth Management Plan was the result of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Committee's decision to locate the training and operational mission of the new Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) F-35 to Eglin Air Force Base and the realignment of the Army's 7th Special Forces Group – Airborne [7 SFG(A)] from Ft. Bragg, NC to a new training center on Eglin near Duke Field.

In 2006, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Walton Counties formed the Tri-County Growth Management Task Force to develop a plan to address the anticipated impacts associated with these realignments to Eglin. At that time the state of the economy in this part of Florida and the southeast was booming and there were concerns of how the local governments would be able to accommodate this extraordinary growth.

The Tri-County Growth Management Task Force sought funds from the Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA) to prepare a study to determine the economic, social and infrastructure impacts on the Tri-County Communities as a result of the BRAC activities. At the same time, OEA funded a Joint Land Use Study (JLUS) to determine the specific impacts in the Tri-County area as a result of the addition of new F-35 aircraft training and operational missions. In addition, the Air Force developed an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the BRAC actions as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

The results of the JLUS and the EIS have each played a significant role in the development of this Growth Management Plan.

In May of 2008, following a competitive selection process and negotiations, the team of HDR, Matrix Design Group and the Haas Center from the University of West Florida was hired to prepare the Tri-County Growth Management Plan. Since the organization of the Tri-County Growth Management Task Force and the inceptions of the Tri-County Growth Management Plan, the impact of radically altered economic circumstances on the tri-county regional area is relatively easy to grasp at the macro-level. Some issues, such as housing availability, that once appeared major, have all but ceased to be an issue. Concerns regarding housing affordability have eased as well, although they have not

evaporated completely. Still others, such as transportation, particularly along the Highway 85 corridor in Okaloosa County, continue to loom rather large.

The challenge in assembling the Growth Management Plan lies in correctly gauging the future in light of the present circumstances that differ substantially from those envisioned nearly 3 years ago. Two key points remain as relevant today as they were to those involved in initiating the process. First, as this document will demonstrate, challenges will certainly accompany BRAC-related growth in the tri-county region even though those challenges may be different from those envisioned three years ago. Second, the economic and demographic impacts of BRAC realignments will be substantial and will leave a particularly large imprint on future growth in Okaloosa County.

The goal of the Growth Management Plan is to provide the affected local governments with a sense of predictive assessment as to where the military personnel and dependants are expected to reside in the region and to assess their incremental impact on facilities and services beyond what currently exists or is planned for by the local government based on normal growth. This latter point is very important. All local governments in Florida are required to prepare a comprehensive plan based on historical and projected population estimates. In addition, these plans must be adopted by the local government and must be financially feasible—that is they must contain a list of capital needs and identify a means to fund or pay for these needs. The determinate of the level of needs for various services or facilities is based on locally adopted and recognized standards for service known as level of service standards.

The assessment of existing governmental service conditions and potential impacts as a result of the BRAC growth, along with the recommendations contained in the Growth Management Plan are derived from the adopted level of service standards of each county or municipality. In addition, there are recommendations for policy changes to be implemented through the local comprehensive plans and small area studies to be conducted to provide greater guidance for future development.

The Growth Management Plan consists of the following components, 1) An atlas (Previously submitted – not a part of this volume) and qualitative assessment of

A. INTRODUCTION

existing conditions from demographics and economy to land use, housing, transportation, utilities, education, health care, public safety and quality of life; 2) a development suitability analysis to identify the most likely areas for new or expanded development; 3) evaluation and selection of alternative growth areas; 4) plan development and recommendations; and 5) implementation schedule.

This document is organized by county, but preceded by a discussion of the demographics and economy of the three county area and a discussion of the development suitability analysis which narrowed the most likely growth areas in each county.

Within each County the topical elements are divided into four areas—**Land and Homes, People and Jobs, Support Infrastructure, and Community Fabric**. The latter two are further divided into Transportation, Utilities and Public Safety under Support Infrastructure while Education, Health Care, and Quality of Life are grouped under Community Fabric.

The planning process has engaged a broad spectrum of residents and service providers in the tri-county area. In addition to an Executive Committee made up of key county and city representatives, Eglin AirForce Base, chambers of commerce and economic development agencies. There are ten Sub Committees whose members are engaged in one of ten functional areas: Transportation, Education, Environmental, Utilities, Public Health, Housing, Planning, Economic Development, Law Enforcement or Citizen Advisory. On each of these committees are also representatives from Eglin AFB. During the course of the past two years the sub committees have provided vital input and review of the documents and process. Through the efforts of Okaloosa County and particularly Jeff Fanto, Growth Management Coordinator, the Atlas and draft documents have been made available to the committees and general public. The most recent was a draft of the Executive Summary highlighting the recommendations in February of 2010. In mid February public workshops were held in each county and at the Executive Committee to brief the public. After inspection of these findings by the various entities involved in commissioning the study, the consultants have revisited the recommendations contained in the Draft Executive Summary and updated them according to the suggestions received in the vetting process.

This Growth Management Plan will then be released to the commissioning entities in its final format. The final document is organized, as described earlier, by county growth area and is greatly expanded to encompass the entirety of the planning process. The recommendations contained in this final document will be designed to fully address challenges that will accompany BRAC-related growth.

Acknowledgements

The Consultant Team wishes to acknowledge and thank the current and past members of the Executive Committee who have promoted and fostered the development of the Tri-County Growth Management Plan. In addition the Team wishes to acknowledge the tireless efforts of all the members of the sub committees who provided valuable input and review at the committee and public workshop level throughout the course of the planning effort.

Current members:

Chairman – Commissioner Wayne Harris (Okaloosa County)
Vice Chairman – Col Bruce McClintock (Eglin AFB)
Mr. Robert Arnold – Eglin AFB
Dr. David Goetsch – Northwest Florida State College
Paul Thorpe – Northwest Florida Water Management District
Commissioner Don Salter – Santa Rosa County
Commissioner Larry Jones – Walton County
Mayor Mike Anderson – City of Fort Walton Beach (League of Cities representative)
Larry Sassano – Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County
Lt Gen (Ret) Gordy Fornell
Lois Hoyt
John Hofstad – Okaloosa County Public Works Director
Ted Corcoran – Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce (Joint Chamber of Commerce representative)
Bob Black – Congressman Jeff Miller’s Office (Ex Officio attendee)

Previous members:

Commissioner James Campbell – Okaloosa County (past EIGC Chairman)
Dr. James Richburg – Northwest Florida State College
Danielle Slaterpryce – Former Okaloosa County Public Works Director
Commissioner Scott Brannon – Walton County