

New report details impact of BRAC (Read REPORT)

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CRESTVIEW — The economic impact of military realignment in Northwest Florida will be marked first by a backward slide, followed by years of steady growth.

That's the conclusion of a report compiled by the University of West Florida's Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development on Base Realignment and Closure's fiscal ramifications through 2020.

By 2010, Okaloosa, Walton and Santa Rosa counties' collective population will decrease by 1,078 because of Eglin Air Force Base's 33rd Fighter Wing standing down as a combat unit, according to the report, which was presented at an Okaloosa County Commission meeting this week.

There will be \$13.7 million less in the region's coffers because of the change, the Haas Center projects.

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But the 33rd's replacement by the Joint Strike Fighter Integrated Training Center, along with the arrival of the Army 7th Special Forces Group, will reverse that, the center says.

By 2020, the population in the three-county area will have increased by 10,690, almost 6,000 new jobs will have been created and the economy will have grown by \$468.8 million, according to the report.

"Now, we have kind of a U-shaped pattern of economic activity," Haas Center Director Rick Harper said of the initial losses followed by long-term gains.

But that growth will create a greater demand on schools and roads. Affordable housing will also be a major issue, and Harper said the Crestview and Mossy Head areas and eastern Santa Rosa County will be prime affordable-housing areas.

Okaloosa County and the Air Force are working to ensure the transition goes as smoothly as possible.

Jeff Fanto, the county's growth project coordinator, is encouraged by the Haas Center's report.

"It's all very positive for Okaloosa County," he said.

But a lot of work lies ahead to improve traffic flow on major roads and to make sure future growth is controlled so the Air Force can fulfill its mission and residents' quality of life is maintained, he said.

Fanto said the county and Eglin continue to look at realignment's potential impact on U.S. Highway 98 and the possibility of a bypass through the base's reservation.

But he said that's "one part of what we're looking at" in transportation. He also cited the need for sufficient air travel to complement roads.

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