

By Paul Woolverton and Andrew Barksdale

Congressional leaders who represent Fort Bragg and the Cape Fear region say people shouldn't read too much into a new report suggesting that the Army post could lose 8,000 soldiers and civilian workers by 2020.

David Ward, a spokesman for Republican U.S. Sen. Richard Burr, said the Army has not told Burr of any impending troop reductions at Fort Bragg.

"The long-range analysis issued by the Army is a planning document that outlines possible scenarios and paths forward, but it does not indicate a final decision," Ward said.

There likely will be changes in force levels, but "Sen. Burr realizes the strategic value of the unique forces based at Bragg and expects the Army will take that into account during its future force structure deliberations," Ward said.

On Friday, the Army published a draft report outlining what could happen if the U.S. moves forward on plans to cut the number of brigade combat teams in a broad restructuring of the nation's fighting force.

The report analyzes plans to cut the Army from 562,000 personnel now to 490,000 in 2020 and the potential fallout for the local economies.

Under one scenario, more than 10,500 jobs could be lost in Cumberland County and the surrounding region just a few years after a base realignment process brought thousands of new troops and civilians to the post. The cuts also could mean a loss of up to \$24.7 million in state tax revenue, lower home values and a dip in incomes in the region."

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, a Lumberton native representing the 7th District, said it's "alarming to learn that the place our nation calls on during times of military conflict could potentially see such a drastic decrease in its force, as well as potential loss of jobs in the region.

"However, I have been assured that this is just a proposal and that no final decisions have been made," he said. "As a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, I am committed to ensuring that Bragg is not impacted and that we continue the advancements in military construction at the installation to ensure that growth there can continue to flourish."

Democratic U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan said Fort Bragg is critical to the nation's defense and the state's economy.

"As a member of the Armed Services Committee, I am committed to fighting to protect Fort Bragg and all of our North Carolina bases," she said.

U.S. Rep. Renee Ellmers, a 2nd District Republican, and 4th District U.S. Rep. David Price, a Democrat, said the report is not a predictor of what will happen, but an assessment of what could happen under different scenarios.

"As a planning document, it should be viewed in the way it was written and presented - as a useful guide so that our military can be prepared for any changes," Ellmers said.

State Rep. John Szoka, who lives in the Gates Four community, said it would be unwise to cut Fort Bragg's 82nd Airborne Division. Szoka served 20 years in the Army and saw prior reductions in the size of its force.

"Any major cut of troops here at Fort Bragg would not be a good thing," Szoka said. "For two reasons. One: The impact on the local community, and two: My concern about the ability of the United States to project force."

Szoka said that when he was in the service, he helped the Army decide how to restructure its forces to meet the nation's war-fighting needs up to 20 years into the future.

"When you're looking at the 82nd's mission, there's only one unit that can do it, and that's the 82nd. So it would, in my opinion ... not be wise to cut a brigade combat team out of the 82nd," he said.

A policy expert in Washington said the U.S. built up the number of brigade combat teams to handle rotations during two wars, which are now winding down, so it's only natural to reduce that number of combat teams.

"Now that we're out of Iraq and ending the combat mission in Afghanistan, I'd expect that we'd see the military go back to 2002-2003 force levels," Mieke Eoyang, director of the national security program the Third Way, said in an email Tuesday.

But Eoyang said she doesn't expect to see another round of base realignment and closure, certainly not like the several rounds in the 1990s.

Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst for the Cato Institute, said the future of force reductions remains murky.

"America's reduced commitments abroad could make Fort Bragg vulnerable to cuts in force structure," she said. "Yet, no decision has been made, and Fort Bragg could be spared."

Several local elected officials said the prospect of losing 8,000 soldiers and civilian workers at Fort Bragg highlights a flaw in the economies of the Army post's neighboring cities and towns: They are too dependent on the military.

"We can't put all of our eggs in one basket," said Spring Lake Mayor Chris Rey, a 35-year-old former Army captain.

The roads of Fayetteville and Spring Lake near Fort Bragg are lined with restaurants, car dealerships and other shops catering to Fort Bragg. The post has a daily working population of nearly 55,000 soldiers and civilians.

State Rep. Elmer Floyd, a Fayetteville Democrat, said poor decisions by local leaders decades ago have left the community too dependent on the military dollar. He called it "a big mistake."

They tried to maintain Cumberland County as a farm community, Floyd said, "so we didn't reach out when they were doing road, infrastructure projects, to grab some of those dollars so we could grow along with Raleigh and Durham. As a community, we're going to have to come together to determine what is it that we want to be."

Doug Peters, president of the Fayetteville Regional Chamber, said about 40 percent of the local economy depends on the military and defense contractors. Their paychecks spur employment everywhere, from grocery and electronics stores to housing and banking.

"These proposed cuts at Fort Bragg would have a terrible impact on our region," Peters said in an email.

He said potential cuts in the military as Washington grapples with skyrocketing national deficits mean local officials should work hard to promote more jobs in the private sector.

The city of Fayetteville, Cumberland County and the city-owned Public Works Commission have a long-standing contract with the chamber to promote economic development and negotiate incentives packages.

In Spring Lake, Rey said officials already are planning to diversify by seeking to revitalize Main Street and bring in sporting events and festivals that would attract tourists and entice new residents.

Greg Taylor, executive director of the Fort Bragg Regional Alliance, said he had not read the report yet but hopes Fort Bragg would be spared the brunt of any broad force reductions.

"I don't think Fort Bragg is going away at this point," he said.

The Army post was a winner in the last base realignment round, which was announced in 2005 and completed in 2011. Another BRAC round has not been scheduled yet by Congress.

Fayetteville Mayor Tony Chavonne echoed Taylor's sentiment, pointing out that the U.S. has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on new residences, offices and other improvements at Fort Bragg over the past decade.

The mayor believes personnel reductions won't be so severe, and to the extent there are cuts, he said, they would be gradual.

"Given enough time," he said, "we could absorb that in our local economy."