

Businesses hope for post's survival

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By Matthew Mogul | *Staff Writer*

Whether Jugal Purohit's new Wingate Inn hotel on Gordon Highway can stay in business in coming years should matter to most Augustans.

Located just a few miles from Fort Gordon's Gate 1, Mr. Purohit says nearly half the guests at his 64-room hotel are directly tied to goings-on at the military post. And with the specter of another round of nationwide base closures again placing Fort Gordon in Washington's cross-hairs, Mr. Purohit fears the \$3.4 million it took to build his hotel could turn into a bad investment.

"We rely on long-term training programs at the fort, as well as kids' graduation ceremonies and defense contractors' conventions to generate business," said Mr. Purohit, who owns three other hotels in the metropolitan area. "The fort closing would most certainly break my bones and do damage to many businesses in this town."

With a decision on the post less than two years away, city officials are quickly trying to assess how the loss of the fort, after more than six decades of deep-rooted ties to the community, would affect the local economy.

Fort Gordon is the No. 1 employer on the Georgia side of the Augusta-Aiken area, accounting for roughly one out of 12 workers. A fort closure would mean 17,000 fewer jobs, nearly a quarter of them civilian.

Still, that doesn't come close to gauging the full brunt of the pain that would be felt, says retired Army Col. Thom Tuckey.

"We're talking about realtors, bankers and even pizza delivery boys," said Mr. Tuckey, a former garrison commander at Fort Gordon now working as a military consultant for the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce in its efforts to save the post. "No one would be spared."

Mr. Tuckey estimates that the direct impact comes close to \$1.4 billion. His study will likely produce a larger, more daunting number when it tracks how dollars generated by the post trickle from one business to the next.

The outgrowth of the fort has prompted a string of stores to pop up in south Augusta over the years that might collapse like dominoes if the worst-case scenario plays out. Fast-food joints, after-hour watering holes, and the plethora of tattoo parlors rely heavily on soldiers' dollars, as do many of the used car dealerships nearby.

Less visible, yet no less tied to the fort's fate, are a whole host of other businesses.

Just ask Elmira Chivers, a real estate agent at Veterans Reality, less than five minutes from the post's Gate 5. As many as three-quarters of her 75 clients are military-related, both serving and retired.

Todd Dickson, the property manager for Collier Management on Frontage Road off Belair Road, says his five properties would survive a fort closing because less than 10 percent of his residents

put on camouflage to go to work each day. That said, Mr. Dickson describes the base closing as a nightmare.

"The side effect would see property prices come way down in regards to rentals and ownership," he explains. "We'd all suffer for years."

On post, Gus Velez leads a staff of 400 that could lose their jobs. As the general manager of Johnson Controls, a multinational facilities services firm, he oversees everything from cutting the grass to fixing the plumbing.

"If it breaks, we fix it," he says. "Over 80 percent of the materials we buy from lumber to nails goes to small businesses in the community."

The way things stand now, Mr. Tuckey guesses the post's chances are 50-50. Those are odds that Kiran Shah doesn't like to hear. Unlike Mr. Purohit, he is holding back from developing a one-acre patch of land in front of his Quality Inn on Belair Road.

"I wouldn't do that right now," he said. "It's simply too risky."