

The Regional Reporter

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Base Realignment and Closure

Military makes new plans to pull up stakes

Some tips on what to look for in the coming months

By MARC HELLER

It's been called the mother of all BRACs. After three years of anticipation, military base realignment and closure is becoming reality – and regional reporters have plenty of work ahead as localities brace for the outcome.

For anyone who doesn't know, BRAC is the process by which the government closes, shrinks or grows military installations. It's happened a few times before, most recently in 1995, and there's no better example of how policies and decisions set in Washington affect readers back home. Posts close, and communities can shrivel. They expand, and suddenly new shopping centers pop up near the Interstates.

Right now, the Defense Department is putting finishing touches on the first major phase of the process, as it drafts a list of posts to close and realign. That list will be released on or about May 16. Then the independent Base Realignment and Closure Commission has until Sept. 8 to make final recommendations to the president; past commissions have veered little from the Pentagon's list, but when they have, huge controversies have erupted.

Up to now, the discussions have been tightly secretive. Teams working on the

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RESTIVE REGIONS

Chris Smith, former D.C. correspondent for the Salt Lake Tribune, has left to become AP bureau chief in Boise, Idaho.

Former Cincinnati Enquirer correspondent **Carl Weiser**, a former RRA president, has returned to the Enquirer in Ohio as political editor.

Larry Bivins now covers regional trends and writes enterprise stories for Gannett News Service. He previously served as correspondent for Gannett's Tennessee papers, where he has been replaced by **Mike Madden**.

Dennis Camire has switched from correspondent for Gannett's Louisiana papers to correspondent for Gannett papers in Hawaii, Guam and Utah. **Ana Radelat** replaces him as Louisiana correspondent.

Catalina Camia, previously a Washington editor for Gannett News Service, has moved to USA TODAY's Washington bureau where she serves as assignment editor for the Congress team.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By JESSICA WEHRMAN ■ Scripps Howard News Service

A regional potpourri from newsmakers to story ideas

Scattered notes this month from regional-land. Hope this doesn't get too Larry King for you guys:



It's been a busy month of newsmakers — first a panel discussion on proposed changes to the Community Development Block Grant program, then a tour of the Center for Responsive Politics — but next month may prove to every bit as busy.

First, we have an April 4 panel discussion on tax reform at the Treasury Department. Members will get the chance to sit down with Jeff Kupfer, executive director of the advisory panel on tax reform. That same week, we'll have a virtual newsmaker with the Education Trust. The Trust is offering training on data on their website which will allow users to examine high school graduation rates broken down by students' race, ethnicity and gender. That is scheduled for April 6.

That said, we're always interested in whatever newsmakers you'd like us to schedule for you. We'll try to find some that address the big stories, but are always looking for your ideas. Got a great source who you wouldn't mind sharing? Please let us know. We hope to have a BRAC newsmaker soon, and are contacting press offices around the cabinet trying to set up newsmakers with different officers.

For your ideas, please contact regionalreporters@yahoo.com.



A reminder that it's time to re-up your congressional press passes.



The news from the RRA coffers isn't too encouraging. Though well over 100 of

you are on our mailing list, only a little more than 60 of you have paid up for this year.

We're trying to make it easy for you: You can now pay your dues through www.rra.org. Dues are still only \$20. We challenge you to find a better bang for your buck.

For those of you who prefer the old-fashioned snail mail method, you can send us your check at RRA, Ben Franklin Station, P.O. Box 254, Washington, DC 20044. For other concerns, you can call me at 202-887-8328. Or bring your checkbook to the next newsmaker. We'll pass it on to the appropriate person.



Got a great story? Want to show off your work? We're interested in featuring great regional stories on our site. It's a great opportunity to showcase a smart idea and ultimately pick your colleagues' brains for sources and ideas. Email us your good work at regionalreporters@yahoo.com. We're only too happy to share it.

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base-by-base evaluations at the Pentagon reportedly had to sign agreements not to divulge details. But when the list reaches the commission, the discussions and the Pentagon's documentation become much more public, which should provide plenty of fodder for stories. Public hearings are part of the mix.

"It's such an open process," said Paul J. Hirsch, president of Madison Government Affairs and a lobbyist on base closure.

In some ways, this BRAC is like any other – defense officials, and then the commission – will examine all sorts of data about each military installation. Hearings will be conducted. Officials will talk about the future of the military. People will disagree about costs and benefits. But there are differences as well.

For one, defense officials are much more outspoken this time about "transformation" in the military, especially in the Army. And Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is personally involved, which should be an indication to anyone who knows Washington that BRAC will not be timid.

Congress has also curtailed the ability of the BRAC commission to close posts that the Pentagon wants to keep open, drawing a lesson from previous rounds.

So what are some ways to approach BRAC as a reporter?

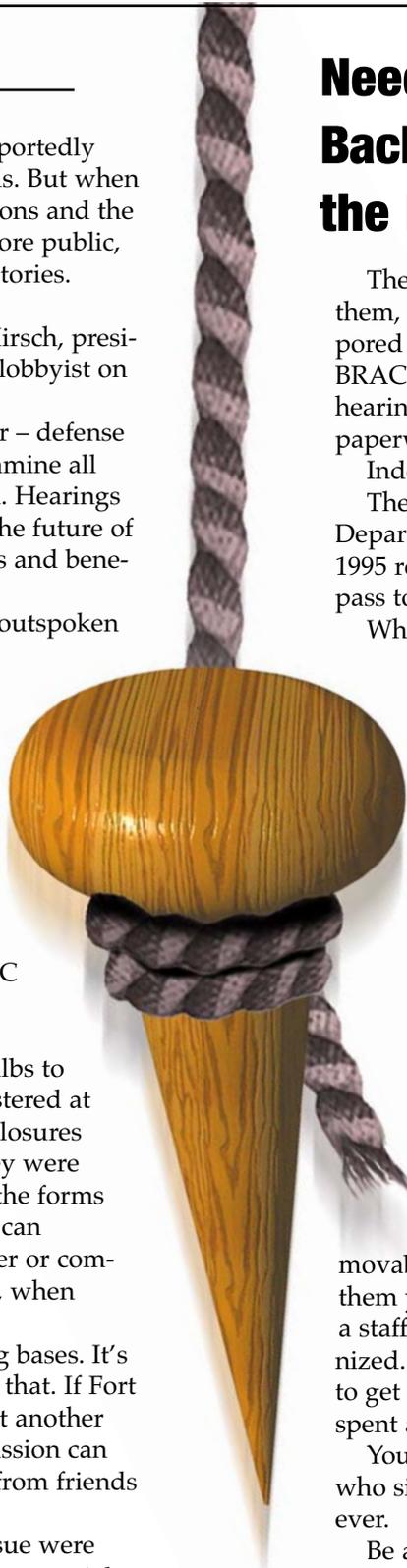
Consider the following:

- Lobbyists have sprouted like spring bulbs to protect particular installations. They're registered at the House Clerk's Office, and while the disclosures don't always indicate exactly how much they were paid on BRAC versus other defense issues, the forms do reveal their clients and policy areas. You can search by clients, too, such as a local chamber or commerce. It's good to disclose their clients, too, when you quote them as experts on the process.

- Lobbying is about more than protecting bases. It's about badmouthing the rivals, if it comes to that. If Fort Drum, N.Y., for instance, isn't on the list, but another Army "maneuver" base is, the BRAC commission can expect to hear bad things about Fort Drum from friends of the other base.

- Some of the people lobbying on this issue were staffers on previous commissions. They've got special insight into the process, and maybe lingering priorities. It's another good thing to disclose to readers.

- Think about the backgrounds of the nine BRAC commissioners. Some states, especially California, were pleased to have some representation, while others, such



Need Some BRAC Background? Try the BRAC Library

The last base closure round, like all of them, carried on for months as military teams pored over data from installations. Then the BRAC commission visited posts and held hearings. That must have created a lot of paperwork.

Indeed it did.

The "BRAC library" is where the Defense Department holds on to documents from the 1995 round. And you don't need a Pentagon pass to get in.

While I did not find any "smoking guns" in my visit, the library gave me background that I needed to report and write intelligently on the issues facing Fort Drum, home of the Army's 10th Mountain Division. I found hundreds of pages of data and reports on the Army's informal discussions about closing Fort Drum and moving the 10th Mountain Division to Fort Hood or Fort Bliss, for instance – and detailed information about why officials ultimately thought that was a bad idea.

There are also letters from locals. I found a handwritten one from a guy who complained in 1995 that training exercises were breaking his windows. They kept this stuff.

The files are stored in boxes on movable file cabinets, and you have to find them yourself; there are no librarians, though a staffer will explain how things are organized. It took me about 2 or 3 hours of work to get what I really wanted, but I could have spent a lot longer there.

You'll be asked to sign in. You can then see who signed in before you – lobbyists or whoever.

Be aware: staff reports that some documents are missing. You're on an honor system not to steal.

The library is in a leased office building in Crystal City, about two blocks from the Metro station. It's important to call ahead and make an appointment. The number is 703-607-3207.

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– By Marc Heller

Block grant proposal stumbles in Congress; panelists debate changes at RRA newsmaker

By JESSICA WEHRMAN

The proposal is to "Strengthen America's Communities," aimed at consolidating a variety of grant programs into one more effective block of money targeted at the nation's poorest communities. But a Feb. 25 newsmaker co-sponsored by the National Press Club and the Regional Reporters Association found the premise of that proposal the subject of debate.

Sandy Baruah, chief of staff for the Commerce Department's Economic Development, said the Bush budget plan would merge the 30-year-old Community Development Block Grant with 17 other programs. The \$4.1 billion CDBG program would merge with programs including the Community Service Block Grant program and all would be moved to Commerce under the Bush plan. It would drop funding for the 18 programs from \$5.6 billion to \$3.7 billion,

a 35 percent cut, according to the White House's Office of Management and Budget.

Baruah said the Bush administration wanted to consolidate the programs because each had different reporting requirements, eligibility requirements and criteria for success.

"It is truly a federal maze," he said, adding that the programs were "duplicative."

He argued that much of the funds go to communities and states with less poverty than the national average. But Saul Ramirez with the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials said even cities that are above the national average can have poor areas.

An amendment to the U.S. Senate budget resolution restored the CDBG program to its original home in HUD and restored funding for the bill. The House bill included language to express the intent to increase commu-

nity development spending by more than \$1 billion. But neither bill addressed funding for the proposed "Strengthening America's Communities" plan. It's unclear whether the administration will continue to push for the program.

Despite the budget votes, NAHRO spokesman say the organization continue to be concerned about how the program will fare in the appropriations process.

Also at the newsmaker were Larry Minnix, CEO of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging and Deborah Cutler-Ortiz, director of the Family Income and Jobs Division at the Children's Defense Fund. To them, the fact that programs were being merged into Commerce was less offensive than the proposed budget cuts. Both argue that cuts in the program would endanger the elderly and children who live in low-income housing.

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as Connecticut, complained about no representation. Troll around for anything that the more prominent members have said about how they think the Army, Air Force, etc. should look in the years ahead. That'll give a clue about what types of posts they'd give preference.

■ The Bush administration is all about farming out business to the private sector. There's a lot of talk in the defense world about giving more work on research and development and other "non-warfighting" duties to contractors. So R&D facilities may be vulnerable, defense analysts say. "We've heard over and over, 'It's warfighting; it's not making widgets,'" said C. Randall Beach, a base closure consultant in Albany, N.Y., who worked on the redevelopment of Plattsburgh Air Force Base in New York.

■ All the talk's been about closure. But think about other solutions the commission and Pentagon may have in mind. Loren Thompson, a defense analyst at the Lexington Institute, said a high-ranking Pentagon official told him this round will be "less about closure than realignment."

■ Not all the lobbyists are in Washington. Some are in state capitals. It pays to keep in touch with the state capital

correspondent.

■ It's been beaten around a bit, but think about the amount of construction on installations in your readership area. Some lawmakers believed they could "BRAC-proof" a base by securing lots of money for military construction, which may or may not be valid. Fort Drum miraculously received a \$37 million hangar in the war supplemental spending bill, for instance.

■ Is the post in your community used by more than one branch of the military? Does the National Guard or Reserve use it for training? The odds are better that it won't be closed.

■ Is the post in your community an environmental land mine? Two schools of thought: It's expensive to close, but it'd be nice for the government to be free of it.

■ Compare the posts in your community today to what they were like in 1995. Did the Pentagon or BRAC commission spot weaknesses then? You may find that the local lawmaker steered certain types of improvements the post's way since then.

■ It's good to see what other papers are doing with this story. If you can stand the constant e-mail, create a Google News Alert, and you'll get BRAC news from time to time all day long.

Want to 'Track the Payback' in Congress? Try 'Opensecrets'

By JESSICA WEHRMAN

Every two years, regional reporters get a slew of data off the FEC database, write up a story on how much their congressional candidates are getting and who's giving it, and track the horse race of who's winning the financial race.

Then, the race ends, and the data often sits ignored for another two years.

But the Center for Responsive Politics, a group which tracks money in politics, argues that the show doesn't end on Election Night. By tracking the data and how lawmakers vote on special interest causes, they argue, reporters can have substantive stories that illuminate conflicts of interest that often sit ignored.

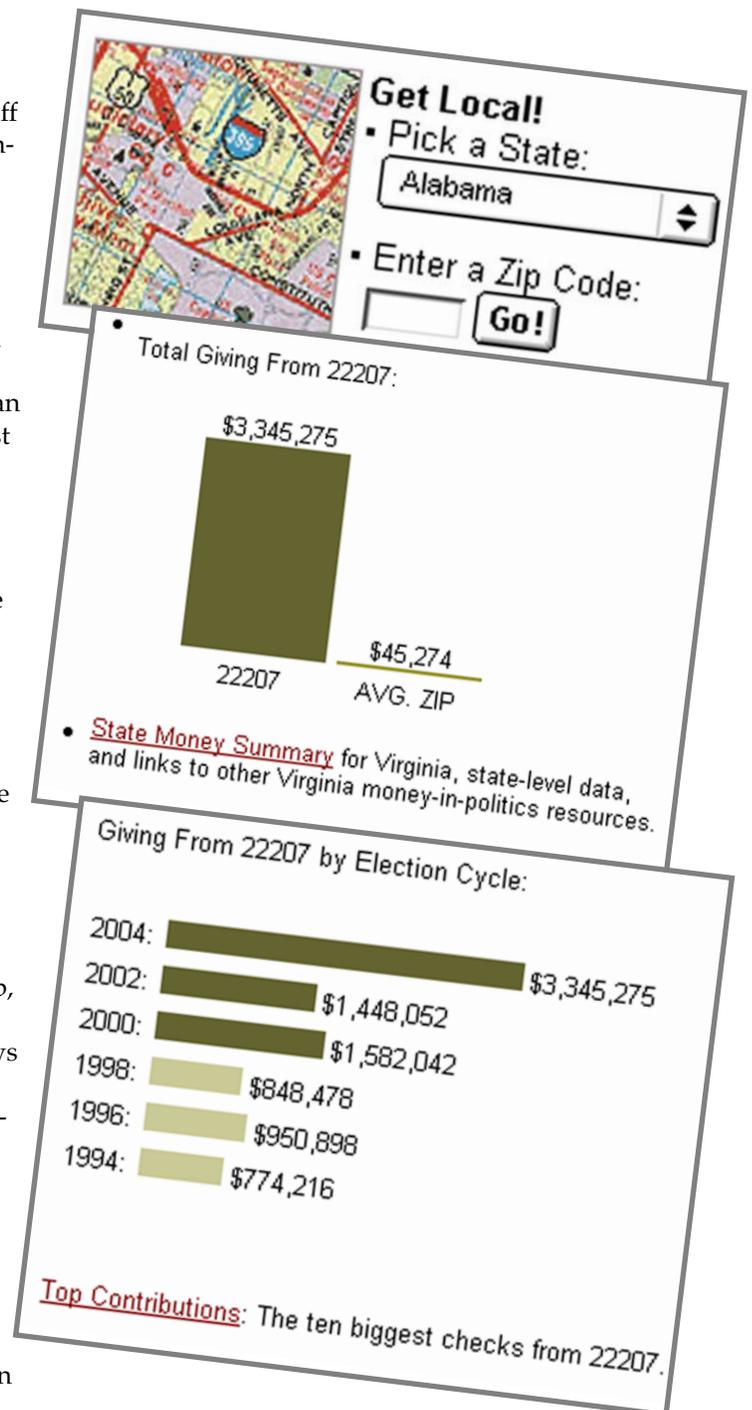
In March, Sheila Krumholz and Steve Weiss of the Center walked regionals through their website (www.opensecrets.org) highlighting the way the center is tracking and compiling the data. It's a reporter's goldmine — the data in itself is a wealth of story ideas, but taken together, it often offers a telling look at special interests that McCain-Feingold couldn't quite contain.

Most reporters will find the "Who Gives" and "Who Gets" tabs on the top of the page the most informative. "Who Gives" allows reporters to track which industries are giving the most money to which parties. Casinos/Gambling, for example, have been fairly even contributors to both Democrats and Republicans. Accountants, meanwhile, have skewed heavily toward Republicans since the Republican Revolution of 1994.

Many reporters have accessed the election overview tab, which allows access to basic information on contributions and PAC breakdown. Perhaps fewer have gone to the news tab, where "Track the Payback" allows reporters to match the topic of the day, such as bankruptcy reform, with leading lobbyists, such as the American Bankers Association. When reporters need to do something on the topical issues, a check of the CRP site can be helpful.

One of the more useful features on the site is the "Get Local!" tab on the top of the page. It allows reporters to plug in zip codes and find contributions from that area. It's worthwhile for reporters who cover multiple zip codes — where does most of the money in their circulation area come from?

While the CRP site is a wealth of knowledge, Weiss and Krumholz stressed that reporters who need even more data can contact them to help them compile data in a meaningful manner. In the meantime, they suggest a good, meaty tour of the Web site. It's worth a few ideas.



MEETING MINUTES

March 21

Present: Jess Wehrman, Linda Dono, Samantha Young, Todd Gillman, Andy Sher, Stephen Crane, Marc Heller, Todd Gillman, Paul Krawzak, Sean Reilly.

No minutes to approve. Linda Dono gave members a list of members paid up and reported only expenses for supplies for the month of March. Wehrman said the RRA had two successful newsmakers — one by the Center for Responsive Politics, the other on CDBG funding — in the last month. She said the National Press Club has asked to make sure a member introduces themselves before any co-sponsored events at the Press Club, and said NPC members have asked that the RRA strive to achieve balance in any cosponsored newsmakers held at the Press Club.

Andy Sher suggested a Medicare newsmaker, and members debated who would be best to invite to such a newsmaker. Dono updated members on efforts for a virtual newsmaker with the Education Trust, scheduled for April 6. Wehrman said a tax reform newsmaker was set for April 6. Members debated to what degree they would permit Treasury staffers to go off the record or on background during that briefing, and Wehrman said she would push Treasury officials to go on the record at the briefing.

Wehrman asked members to review their guidebooks, and Stephen Crane said he had dozens in his office at UMD. Wehrman will tell Crane about new members so he can ship them guidebooks.

Wehrman asked members what to do about designing the newsletter when Jim Sergent "retires," few suggestions were made. Members are continuing to contact cabinet officials about newsmakers for the rest of the year. Board members volunteered to contact people who have not paid up their dues in the next month, with Sher taking Newhouse, Wehrman taking Scripps and Cox, Gillman going after Belo and Linda going after Gannett. Heller and Wehrman are going to work on a BRAC newsmaker, with Reilly helping with suggested members.

The next meeting is set for April 18.

Treasury official briefs regionals on proposed changes to tax code

By JESSICA WEHRMAN

In January, President Bush established a federal advisory panel that he directed to simplify the tax code while maintaining current revenue and promoting economic growth and fairness. On April 4, members of the Regional Reporters Association sat down with Jeff Kupfer, the panel's executive director and Bob Carroll, deputy assistant secretary for tax analysis at the Treasury Department, for a briefing on the panel's progress.

Carroll began by voicing support for Bush's tax cuts, saying they have helped to boost the economy and create jobs. He argued more than 3 million jobs have been created since May 2003, and unemployment is at 5.2 percent — lower than in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Into that mix comes the tax panel's work. Bush directed the panel to simplify the tax code, making it low-cost and non-intrusive; promote economic growth, meaning businesses and households do not make decisions based on the tax code and fair, so that similarly situated taxpayers receive equal treatment, and the wealthier pay more taxes than the poor.

As an example of the tax code's complexity, he cited the Alternative Minimum Tax, a parallel tax program originally designed to target wealthy people who had managed to escape paying taxes through loopholes in the law. He said the AMT has affected a different group of taxpayers over time, and will continue to affect more people in the years to come — from 3.8 million in 2005 to 51 million in 2015. By 2013, he said, the AMT alone would actually raise more

money than the regular tax alone.

Compliance costs with the current system are also high, he argued. He said some 75 million taxpayers use paid preparers, and it costs individuals and businesses \$125 billion annually to comply with the current tax code. Businesses and individuals spend more than 6 billion hours per year learning about the tax laws, keeping and assembling the necessary records and preparing and submitting their tax returns.

The administration argues that reforming the tax code could raise the GDP by 2 percent to 4 percent in the long run, and he also argues that

By 2013, the AMT alone would actually raise more money than the regular tax alone.

— Bob Carroll, deputy assistant secretary for tax analysis at the Treasury Department

the current tax system imposes an overall average effective tax rate of about 17 percent on investment. He also argued that the current tax code is unfair, with the AMT disproportionately applying to families with children and other middle-income taxpayers. Frequent revisions to the current tax code, he said, makes it difficult for individuals and businesses to make economic decisions.

Those issues, Kupfer said, are just what the panel, headed by former Republican Sen. Connie Mack of Fla., and former Democratic Sen. John Breaux of La., are wrangling with. The panel has had a series of public meetings on the current tax code in Washington, Tampa, Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco, and is to come up with recommendations by the end of July. The panel is now beginning to consider a broad range of recommendations, looking at subjects as wide-ranging as a retail sales tax, a flat tax and a tax on consumed income — income not put into savings.

