

Army Special Forces Group tours future home

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CRESTVIEW - Three assistants from Fort Bragg's Family Readiness Group dipped their toes in the Emerald Coast this week.

They toured Eglin Air Force Base, Destin, Crestview and Fort Walton Beach to gather information to take back to families of the Army 7th Special Forces Group, which will move to Okaloosa County in 2011 as part of the Base Realignment and Closure process.

Three years is not much time for the Special Forces. The group will return to Fort Bragg from deployment in March and be deployed again by May. When the unit returns home again, it will be for the move.

Crestview officials organizing the three-day tour that focused on schools, jobs and resources available in their city.

Darlene Thornton, one of the assistants with the Family Readiness Group, said families' greatest concerns are child care, education and employment opportunities for spouses. The group came armed with questions from the families.

The tour left a great impression on the trio. Thornton said the Special Forces will leave its North Carolina base, where they are one small group in a sea of 150,000 soldiers.

"For us to bring 5,000 to a community with open arms ... we're just blown away," Thornton said.

They learned that local homes offer more square footage for the money than those in North Carolina. Readiness Group assistant Felecia Neal said many of the soldiers were less than 25 years old with three or four children. The families live in base housing because there are few affordable options. Coming to Eglin will be a challenge because the base is in the middle of private housing; the families must find homes in surrounding communities, she said.

Crestview officials assured the visitors that the soldiers can afford to call their city home.

The Readiness Group said the Okaloosa County School District will be important to families. The women met with Superintendent of Schools Alexis Tibbetts and principals at Crestview High School, Davidson Middle School and Antioch Elementary School.

After tours Monday and Tuesday, the Family Readiness Group met Wednesday with Crestview City Council members and heads of the recreation, water and sewer, police and the fire departments.

City officials painted the city as a haven for families who want a safe, small-town lifestyle with access to beaches and metropolitan areas.

"We practice community-oriented policing," said police officer Richard Long.

"There's always some kind of event going on," Fire Chief Joe Traylor added of family events from Destin to Pensacola.

He also noted that a fourth fire station to be built will put firefighters within 5 minutes of residents.

"We are ecstatic that you are coming here," said Councilman Charles Baugh.

City officials and members of the Readiness Group left the meeting with a better understanding of how the Special Forces Group will affect the county.

"A lot of our soldiers don't go to Iraq. They go to Panama," said Thornton. "So instead of bringing trinkets back, they bring families back."

The women asked about crime rates, curfews, recreation and public transportation. Many spouses rely on public transportation, speak English as a second language and have Fort Bragg as their only reference of the United States. The women are afraid of what they will find in Okaloosa County.

For many of the families, the transfer to the Emerald Coast will be the first permanent move they have made, the women said. The soldiers have been known to begin and end their military careers at the same base, so families root themselves in the community, Thornton said.

"We like people that want to be part of the community," said Baugh. "We're praying that you will want to make Crestview your roots."

Some spouses have worried that 4-bedroom homes would cost \$500,000, that they would get blown away in hurricanes and find alligators in their toilets.

"I've heard some crazy things from our spouses," Neal said.

The answers the Readiness Group will return with will help some spouses decide whether to relocate. Their roots are so deep at Fort Bragg that some of them are considering staying put. Spouses say that for the few months soldiers are home, they can drive up to North Carolina on weekends.

"Because I'm used to him being gone, he can get used to me being gone," said Neal.

She said she and her colleagues will give spouses an honest impression of the area.

"We're trying to lay their fears to rest," Neal said.