

Havelock looks into the future



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Residents attended a summit meeting on Havelock's future at Craven Community College. The meeting focused on solutions should major defense cuts take place at Cherry Point.

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They may not have a crystal ball, but community and city leaders of Havelock have a feeling what might be coming.

Predictions and expectations of cuts at Cherry Point have local leaders seeking input from residents on how Havelock should move forward under such shaky circumstances.

"Even without sequestration, we are looking at some pretty significant reductions at the base," said John Gumbel, the former commanding officer of what was then NADEP and is now Fleet Readiness Center East at Cherry Point.

Gumbel is part of a steering committee that held a Community Strategic Planning Summit last week at the Havelock campus of Craven Community College. The goal of the meeting was to get input about the city's future from ordinary residents.

"We're trying to get ahead of the curve," Havelock City Manager Jim Freeman said. "I think it's important for all the citizens that we have their input. We don't know what our future is bringing."

Frank Rodriguez, owner of Integrity Bail Bonding of Havelock, was one of the less than 20 residents who attended the meeting.

"It's always a concern whenever you talk about downsizing because everyone always equates that with something negative," he said. "As long as it's done in a systematic way, it may be beneficial sometimes. If you have four people doing the same job, sometimes downsizing to one becomes more efficient, but it all depends on how it's done."

Downsizing of any sort is immediately noticed in the community, as was the case when the government shut down the inpatient side of the Halliburton Naval Hospital at Cherry Point in 2006.

Megan McGarvey, spokeswoman at CarolinaEast Medical Center in New Bern, said the hospital saw an immediate increase in labor and delivery visits by military mothers and by those using the TRICARE military insurance.

"Last year our TRICARE military visits were over 39 percent," she said.

Some service industries may still thrive despite base reductions.

"I think the way we look at it is that certainly it would be some impact, but I just really feel like if we are a good business and we've made a good name for ourselves, we're still going to get repeat business coming back to the area," said Cindy King, manager of the Holiday Inn Express and Suites in Havelock. "... If we continue to give good customer service and have a great product, we're going to continue to have good customers, a lot of customers."

Duane Reynolds, a retired Marine, was among those who felt making Havelock a place where people want to live is crucial, despite what happens on the base.

"We already had roots here in Havelock in the community and wanted to raise our children in beautiful eastern North Carolina," said Reynolds, head of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Coastal Carolina. "I'm a family man, so I've always been about family and community and I love the predictability of Havelock. We know our community's strengths and weaknesses and know a lot of the citizens that I've come to know and become friends with. We have a strong school system. Our kids all got a quality public education coming through the schools here in Havelock."

Scott Chase, the recently-resigned city planning director, said there was a new paradigm as to why people chose to live where they do.

"People used to go where the jobs are. Now people want to go where they want to be," Chase said. "If the base does decrease, Havelock has to create a place for people to come to. The new trend nowadays is that people used to go where the jobs are. Now people want to go where the places are, and when they get there, they create work. It's called a creative economy. So it's more important now for Havelock to create a place where people want to come."

Havelock is currently investing in a recreation park around Slocum Creek that will tie in with existing cultural, historical and business assets in the city.

"The bottom line is this is place-making for Havelock," Chase said. "It's a natural resource known for fishing and boating and having access to the Neuse River so you take that marketability of that natural resource in itself and then you take the history that you have here and the aviation center that you have there next to it."

King's hotel is also near the planned park.

"People that are in the hotel like to get out and walk around and they like a safe place to walk and they love nature trails, so I think it's a great thing, especially for tourism," she said. "I think even for the community, people will enjoy having a nice place to walk."

Havelock Commissioner Will Lewis said the city board supports the project.

"A big issue with any area is what do you do when you get there," Lewis said. "We have some resources here that are natural to the area that we don't necessarily take advantage of like we should. We have an opportunity right now to take advantage of that with the property that we've managed to acquire and turning that area into a little bit of a more active area. We already have a boat ramp that's successful. We have an area that the people of Havelock will be able to go and enjoy the setting that's a little bit unique to the area."

Another project that is long range for Havelock is possible development of a new industrial park on the city's west end that would use the existing railroad.

"Your heavy industry, your larger industry, they like rail," said Chase. "Rail is a way they transport goods and services, and of course when you have that infrastructure already in place, you can create some additional rail spurs from that and then you have the new opportunities with the new Slocum interchange for getting into the base, so you put all that together and you do some envisioning, like how can you create something that would benefit not only heavy industry but the base and make it all work together."

Lewis said such a park would allow partnerships among the base, Morehead City port, industry and the city to flourish.

"It gives us an opportunity to participate in that partnership as well as participate in the benefits of that growth," he said.

Another key component for drawing residents to Havelock is good schools.

"We want to make sure that parents are choosing Havelock schools and not choosing to buy in the corridor and head that way," said Kim Smith, a Havelock High graduate who is now a member of the Craven County Board of Education. "Even though we're part of Craven County, we want to do everything we can to encourage parents and families to continue to choose to live here and make Havelock their permanent place to live."

Part of the education piece is the Havelock campus of Craven Community College, which could have students ready to enter the job market quickly.

"What I'm trying to do is actually grow the community college by offering more courses," said Greg Purvis, director of the Institute for Aeronautical Technology at CCC. "When we are trying to diversify and bring new students to this area, we're trying to make the student more marketable in aviation. By doing that, we are offering programs that might not be offered in other areas."

City and community leaders say last week's meeting did not mark an end to getting public input but was just the beginning.

"We're hoping that we'll get one of those answers that make a difference in Havelock's future," Commissioner Danny Walsh said. "Something new, something different, something that we've never heard of but we can say, 'that's a good idea. That can work.' We surely don't have all the answers and we're looking for some fresh ideas."

Anyone wishing voice their opinion can do so by going to Havelock City Hall or going online to the city website at www.havelocknc.us.