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 Author: BY SUSANNE M. SCHAFER The Associated Press
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Army listens to S.C. citizens on possible Fort Jackson cuts

By SUSANNE M. SCHAFER

The Associated Press

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley reminded an Army delegation Thursday that as a military spouse, she is part of a community that values Fort Jackson and wants to continue supporting its soldiers in the face of budget cuts that could slash its workforce in half.

"I am a spouse of a soldier that deployed," Haley told the delegation, speaking of her husband, Michael, who deployed for a year to Afghanistan as a member of the South Carolina Army National Guard.

"We want you to understand that Fort Jackson is part of our family," the governor said, arguing that the Army's largest training site is more to the state than a source of jobs and federal financial input.

"There's never a soldier or veteran that we want to be in need," Haley said, leading a series of speakers who touted the community's military-friendly history and the strength of its ties to the 100-year-old installation and its 7,000 soldiers and civilians.

Fort Jackson is the Army's largest training installation. It puts 45,000 soldiers through basic combat training every year, which is more than half of all new Army soldiers and more than 60 percent of its female soldiers.

Each year, another 30,000 attend advanced military training classes or attend military specialty schools on the installation, such as those for chaplains, drill sergeants and military financial or human resource officers.

The economic blow of the potential cuts would amount to a loss of 8,000 jobs in the region around the Columbia-based installation and a loss of \$189 million annually to the local economy, according to a University of South Carolina Moore School of Business study described several times by the Fort Jackson boosters.

Brig. Gen. Roger Cloutier, who led the Army delegation, met Thursday morning with Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin and others concerned

about the cuts.

Opening the Thursday afternoon community "listening session," Cloutier told the hundreds of attendees who filled the pews of a local Baptist church, "Your voices matter. Not a single decision has been made."

The one-star general said he expects the Army to make a decision on the potential cuts in the late spring.

Because of the pressure of the budget cuts, the reductions could begin by Oct. 1, he said.

If the Congressionally approved cuts go ahead as planned, the Army has said it would have to slash troops from 500,000 to 420,000 soldiers and severely shrink installations such as Fort Jackson.

Some supporters argued to the team that instead of making cuts at Fort Jackson, the Army should consider closing down smaller basic training sites at installations in other states, such as Fort Benning in Georgia, Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and Fort Sill in Okla-

homa.

"Making basic combat training the one and only job of the commanding general at Fort Jackson would improve the training and bring it to the highest level possible," said retired Army Col. Kevin Shwedo, the former deputy commander at Fort Jackson, and current head of the South Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles.

Kathy Dent, a Columbia resident who works with nonprofit organizations that support soldiers and their families, said her family was one of the original groups that helped donate land to found the Army installation nearly 100 years ago.

"My message is that Fort Jackson supports this community and this community supports Fort Jackson," she said. "I know many veterans who have trained at Fort Jackson who come back here to settle down because they loved it during the time they did their training here."