

SAVANNAH now

Published on SavannahNow.com (<http://savannahnow.com>)

Home sweet Army home

By Sean Harder

Created 2007-07-14 23:30

FORT STEWART - Jayme Keller watched her three children splash through the various sprays at Fort Stewart's water park - one of several amenities keeping her family on the U.S. Army post while her husband fights the war in Iraq.

"We've been here five years. This is his third deployment, and we're sticking around again," said Keller, a Pennsylvania native. "My friends are here. They have things on post for the kids to do. There's just a lot of support here."

That's the sentiment Fort Stewart officials like to hear after years of renovations and new construction designed to make the post near Hinesville more livable and conducive to family life.

In addition to the water park, families can go camping, fishing or bowling. They can catch a movie or roller-skate in a World War II-era gym. The gym eventually will be turned into a club for teenagers, who already can attend youth night at the on-post bar or exercise at a teens-only gym.

In past years, soldiers would deploy, and families would leave to spend all or part of the deployment with family members elsewhere. This year, so far, seems different: Housing occupancy rates are up, Hinesville business sales are showing less of a slump, and there's plenty of activity on post.

"Things have definitely improved here," Keller said. "People are sticking around."

The next test will come in September when school is in session and the last 4,000 soldiers set to deploy leave Fort Stewart.

New homes slow exodus

Many of Fort Stewart's nearly 3,200 housing units have undergone face-lifts. Cramped, aging Army housing has been replaced with spacious new homes in neighborhoods complete with sidewalks, fenced backyards and garages.

To date, about half of the post's housing is either renovated or is new construction, spokesman Kevin Larson said. Another 61 homes for senior non-commissioned officers are due to be completed by next summer.

Post officials say the improvements appear to be working.

Six months into the 3rd Infantry Division's deployment, 91 percent of the post's homes are occupied. In 2005, during the last deployment, 78 percent were occupied.

"The on-post housing has greatly improved," said Lt. Col. Brian Gale, the division's rear detachment commander, whose job includes supporting the families left behind. "All that building was completed while we were deployed the last time, so families came back to really, really nice homes.

"So now, more people have chosen to stay."

Sales slow, still growing

Families who stay in the area are potential customers for Hinesville business owners such as Teri and Mike Moody, owners of Juan's Mexicali, a new restaurant outside the gates of Fort Stewart.

When the first of the division's 20,000 soldiers began to deploy to Iraq, the franchise's sales of burritos, tacos and quesadillas dipped 6 to 10 percent.

The end of the school year dropped sales as much as 30 percent, a temporary lull Mike Moody attributes to summer vacations and families "going to see grandma."

Moody hopes an increase in the number of families staying in the area and a phased return of soldiers set to begin in the spring will keep his business afloat.

"It's real tight right now," he said. "We're not as busy as we were, but we've noticed our delivery has picked up. We've started offering entertainment on Friday nights, and we're getting a good turnout for that."

One indicator of how this year's deployment is affecting the local economy comes from the city of Hinesville's tax coffers.

The city measures its economy through receipts of sales tax revenue, which it collects from area businesses.

In the first four months of this year, tax receipts are 27 percent higher than the same period in 2005, when the Army division last deployed, according to city tax records.

"We're still down from the previous year when the soldiers returned, but we do have more retail establishments now, and that may be playing a factor," said Kim Thomas, the city's chief financial officer.

Some stay for solitude

While new housing is keeping more families on post, residents in older housing areas seem to be clearing out, said Laura Moore, who lives in one of Fort Stewart's aging two-bedroom apartments.

It's precisely that exodus, however, that has kept Moore and her daughter on post while her husband serves a third combat tour in Iraq. In 2005, they stayed with family in North Carolina.

"My apartment is truly falling apart around me, but there is no one above me, and I want to keep my ground-level unit," she said. "I can have the surround sound on my TV and don't have to worry about

people banging on the wall next to me."

Source URL:

<http://savannahnow.com/node/325457>



Jayne Keller holds her two-year-old son Samuel by the arm as he approaches a fountain at the Fort Stewart Water Park. Keller is among the many families that chose to remain in Hinesville while their soldiers are deployed to Iraq. (Photo: John Carrington)