



Aviation brigade to bring soldiers, money to Fort Carson

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Fort Carson will be home to a 2,700 soldier aviation brigade, congressional sources confirmed Monday.

Army leaders briefed Colorado's congressional delegation Monday morning on the move, which would push the post's population of GIs to nearly 30,000 and bring an estimated \$240 million in military construction to the Pikes Peak region.

"It's official: Fort Carson will be getting a new combat aviation brigade," Colorado's Democratic U.S. Sen. Mark Udall said in a statement. The brigade will be established in 2013 and ready for combat by 2014, Udall's office said.

The new 113-helicopter unit will be the Army's 13th combat aviation brigade.

Colorado Springs Republican U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn said construction money could start flowing to Fort Carson within months to improve Butts Army Airfield and build a headquarters and barracks for the unit.

Lamborn said getting cash for the unit will be relatively easy despite congressional budget worries because addressing a helicopter shortfall is an Army priority.

"This is money that's essential to make sure our soldiers are better trained and better equipped," he said.

The brigade would bring hundreds of civilian jobs, such as contractors for aircraft maintenance, high-tech weapons and training simulators.

Outside Fort Carson's gates the impact will be huge, said Fred Crowley, an economist with the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

"We'll pick up 2,100 or 2,200 civilian jobs as result of military jobs," he said.

Using an Army formula for population growth, the move could bring 7,000 people to the Pikes Peak region, including the new soldiers and their families.

The Army has been studying Fort Carson as a home for the helicopter brigade since last year. Last month, the Pentagon confirmed that Fort Carson was a favorite to land the brigade.

But tension increased with a three-week delay in the Pentagon's announcement.

Fort Carson leaders have worked for years to get more helicopters on the post. In Afghanistan, helicopters are a prime mode of transit and supply, creating an argument that soldiers need to train with helicopters in Colorado to get ready for war.

Helicopters are heavily used in Afghanistan because they are immune from the roadside bombs that insurgents use to target convoys.

Brig. Gen. James Doty, Fort Carson's commander, said earlier this month that the area's high altitude terrain makes it a perfect place for helicopter crews to prepare for combat.

Udall said adding the helicopter brigade at Fort Carson will “save lives and improve our fighting capability” by allowing soldiers to train with helicopters.

Fort Carson leaders hadn't been formally notified of the move Monday afternoon and wouldn't comment.

The additional troops will balloon Fort Carson's population of soldiers to a level unseen since World War II.

The move comes as the Defense Department embarks on a five-year austerity plan, designed to carve \$78 billion from Pentagon spending through measures including troop-level cuts from the Army and Marine Corps.

Groups opposed to the new unit at Fort Carson point to the budget as a reason Monday's decision is a bad one.

“I don't understand how, if they're cutting forces, they need another combat aviation brigade,” said Bill Sulzman, who headed the group “Stop the Whop Whop.”

While the helicopter brigade did have opponents, the region's overwhelming support for the military was key in landing the unit for, said Brian Binn, president of military affairs for the Greater Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce.

“They have seen it across the board for how our community takes care of military members at all of our five military bases,” Binn said.

Since his election in November, Gov. John Hickenlooper has said repeatedly that all of Colorado should recognized the impact of the military on its economy.

“This is an important step in our continuing work to brand Colorado as a place where military support and investment are welcome,” he said in an email to The Gazette.

Reporter John Schroyer contributed to this article.