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Rouzerville Commons is seen on Pa. 16 east of Waynesboro, Pa. (Credit: By Joe Crocetta /)

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Changes at Fort Ritchie mean changes for its neighbor, Rouzerville

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(Second of a two-part series)

ROUZERVILLE, Pa. - Rouzerville cannot be seen from Fort Ritchie, but the community is there, waiting, watching and positioning itself to take advantage of redevelopment at the former U.S. Army base.

Less than five miles down a mountainous stretch of Pa. 16, Rouzerville can be expected to feel the housing and economic impact of thousands of new jobs promised for Fort Ritchie. What remains unknown is the extent of that

impact.

"The development of Fort Ritchie is the wildcard. We have no defined timeline of when the (redevelopment) will start to affect us," Washington Township Manager Mike Christopher said.

Corporate Office Properties Trust (COPT) of Columbia, Md., purchased the 590-acre property in two phases beginning in 2006. Fort Ritchie closed in 1998 under the Defense Department's Base Realignment and Closure program.

"We're incentivized by our purchase agreement to have 1,400 jobs in place nine years after we closed on the property," said Chuck Fiala, COPT's senior vice president of government services.

Penalties exist if redevelopment efforts create fewer jobs, he said.

Despite estimates that 4,500 jobs will be created over the next two decades, COPT has planned for a maximum of 673 residential units with various sale prices. According to Fiala, environmental and construction limitations will keep development from exceeding 673 homes.

"The impact will be significant in terms of initial residential development across the greater Waynesboro area as well as Carroll Valley in Adams County, (Pa.)," said L. Michael Ross, president of the Franklin County (Pa.) Area Development Corp.

That residential growth will stretch farther along Pa. 16 into Greencastle and Antrim Township in southern Franklin County, he said.

"Historically, Franklin County housed 50 percent of the work force at Fort Ritchie," local Realtor Paul Gunder said.

Gunder, through Encore Development, is involved with a project that could bring a motel, two restaurants, a 51,000-square-foot strip mall, and an active adult community to Rouzerville near the Wal-Mart and Lowe's that both opened in 2006.

While Encore Development primarily felt the Waynesboro area needed a hotel or motel, Fort Ritchie's redevelopment remains far from forgotten in the planning process.

"We realize as we make contact with potential purchasers or developers for the hotel, we want to market Fort Ritchie," Gunder said.

Gunder said that in talking with people involved with the base's redevelopment, he has heard frustrations about sending workers to hotels in Frederick, Md., and Hagerstown.

"They would like to send people just four or five miles down the road," said Gunder, who said he believes commercial growth in Rouzerville will occur irregardless of Fort Ritchie.

"We're trying to educate policy makers both in Franklin County and at the state level, especially, on the impact that Maryland development will have on Franklin County and the southern tier of Pennsylvania. Even though the development will be outside Pennsylvania, the primary impact will be in Pennsylvania," Ross said.

"I think it's hard for them (in Harrisburg) to grasp the concept of a four-state development," he said.

Waiting

Many community leaders have described a period of waiting until redevelopment begins in earnest at Fort Ritchie.

"It remains unknown as to the exact 'when' for the redevelopment of Fort Ritchie. I don't think anyone can be certain what will happen," said Barry L. Dallara, superintendent of the Waynesboro Area School District.

"I think right now a lot of folks are aware of what's going on at Fort Ritchie. I think people are trying to position themselves so that when the projects unfold up there — which will probably be in the next year with tenants — they can react to that," Ross said.

"They haven't identified a lot of the businesses that will be there. I think people are anxious to hear what type of business opportunities will be there," said Carlene Willhide, executive director of the Greater Waynesboro Chamber of Commerce.

Christopher said he fields such questions as "When are we going to get an office supply store?" and "Where can I go to buy craft supplies?"

"The driver will be Fort Ritchie for them to come in," Christopher said.

He predicted that the "trigger" will be the start of construction for approximately 800,000 square feet that Fiala characterized as a restricted business zone to be marketed to clients in fields such as government, banking and data.

Work and play

Fiala characterized COPT's vision as one "to build a development where you can live, work, recreate and play."

Willhide said she's heard all positive responses to the planned redevelopment of Fort Ritchie. A recent, impromptu conversation with a neighbor of the former base revealed excitement about the proposals.

"She was just interested in the fact that there's going to be something, activity there," Willhide said. "It's going to mean jobs, recreation, housing."

Christopher predicted that an additional 2,000 people will be living in Washington Township in the next 10 years.

"All indications are that if COPT does what they typically do, you'll see a lot of government contractors and related agencies," Ross said. Those positions tend to have higher salaries and bolster that socioeconomic class in the community, he said.

Ross projected that professional and health care services “will spring up in the greater Waynesboro area.”

“With the new businesses coming in, when we tell them that we have this beautiful new development at Fort Ritchie, that will really open their eyes,” said Ann Backer, who is on the board of directors of the Rouzerville Business Association.

“There’s a lot of good people in Washington Township and the Waynesboro area that will be able to adapt and deal with the next 5, 10 years’ challenges presented to them. Fort Ritchie will be the biggest challenge,” Christopher said.

Backer, who runs Blondies on Old Route 16, said she anticipates good things coming from the redevelopment.

“When Fort Ritchie was in full swing, it helped my catering business a whole lot and helped our dining room. ... From my point of view, that will help us,” she said.

Perhaps a testament to the community is the readiness of people like Backer for what’s to come.

“I think Fort Ritchie’s impact is that it’s been 10 years since (the Army) pulled from Washington Township and our business community survived when the major employer disappeared,” Christopher said.

Now, those businesses can flourish with the comeback, he said.

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