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Claire Louder: We must invest in transportation network at Fort Meade

Claire Louder

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West Anne Arundel County continues to grow, with new housing and commercial development arising from Gambrills to Hanover. But none of that growth, which results in increased tax revenues for the county and state, would be occurring if it weren't for our state's largest employer, Fort George G. Meade.

Fort Meade brings an estimated \$23 billion a year to our region, including payroll, purchases, and construction. NSA alone accounts for \$11 billion, with \$2.5 billion awarded to over 500 Maryland companies in 2013 (the most recent year for which figures are available).

Many construction projects are underway on post, ranging from a new Post Exchange to the NSA East Campus on the former golf course, totaling \$1.8 billion in contracts.

Unlike most military bases, the over 51,000 employees at Fort Meade are predominantly civilians and contractors (70 percent), not uniformed military. They live in our communities, own homes, and pay taxes – and 38 percent of them live in Anne Arundel County, over 90 percent in the State of Maryland.

The growth at Fort Meade has spurred significant private investment as well. From the Odenton Town Center, finally underway after years of delays, to continued growth at Arundel Mills, to expansion at National Business Park to accommodate the increasing number of contractors who support Fort Meade, development is everywhere.

This doesn't just benefit private developers: as a tax-capped county, the only way Anne Arundel can increase its tax base is through new development like that occurring around Fort Meade.

With growth comes challenges, and certainly our region has its share. Our transportation network is woefully undersized for the number of commuters traveling to our area. For 51,000 employees at Fort Meade, we have only two bus routes, three MARC stations, and access off two state highways. By contrast, less than half that many people work at the Pentagon (23,000), but it is served by over 18 bus routes, two Metro lines on site, two interstates, and two state highways.

While progress on our transportation network has occurred, it has been slow. Intersection improvements are now underway at Fort Meade access points along Route 175, and the two-lane segment between Reece and Disney Roads has been funded for widening to match the six-lanes that feed it, but several phases of Route 175 expansion have still not been funded. Additional necessary road improvements

include a flyover from Route 32 to Route 198 to expedite traffic at Mapes Road, an upgraded interchange at Route 175 and the Baltimore Washington Parkway, and widening of Route 32 and Route 198.

The failure to adequately improve road access to Fort Meade rises to the level of a national security issue: in the event of an emergency, it would currently be impossible to evacuate the post along existing roads.

On the transit side, maximizing the use of our local MARC Stations as transfer points for Fort Meade commuters has been successful but could be expanded. Enhanced bus service would also encourage people to leave their cars behind; it currently takes two hours to travel from Glen Burnie to Fort Meade by bus and light rail, but only 20 minutes by car, and for many communities in our region there are no connections at all.

The importance of military installations to the local economy is much better understood in other communities across the country, where in the face of cuts local governments have stepped in to fund on-base infrastructure to ensure their installations stay put.

The least we can do in Maryland is to provide an adequate transportation network for this important economic asset.

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