

Military work could be boon for contractors

BY WAYNE FAULKNER

Wanted: Subcontractors for a five-year, \$750 million construction project at Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point Air Station.

When? Like, right now.

The call by Sundt Construction Inc. is so new that the Tempe, Ariz., company doesn't yet have it on its website.

But it is on the N.C. Military Business Center's website, where companies and individuals will find an enormous collection of information on military business, contracts, bids, rules and procedures.

The business center and the coordinating N.C. Military Foundation are at the center of a policy by Gov. Beverly Perdue to enhance the military's business contribution to the state's economy. That amounted to about \$4 billion last year – the second biggest sector after agriculture, and ahead of tourism.

The key word for Wilmington-area companies is sub.

Because these companies and their employees will be working for Sundt and other contractors – and not the military – getting a piece of the action is considerably less complicated than becoming a general contractor.

The process can be done online, Sundt says.

Sundt is specifically targeting North Carolina businesses. And those businesses will be working for Sundt and four other contractors.

"We believe that there is a tremendous opportunity in the eastern part of the state," Perdue said.

"It appears on its face that it is very hard to break through the existing network of big contractors – that has somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody in Washington that goes back to the '50s," Perdue said.

"But they don't have a lock on the subcontractors."

"The average subcontractor in the

Wilmington area does not fully realize the opportunities that are available through the BRAC reconfiguration," said Hansen Matthews, partner in the Maus, Warwick Matthews commercial real estate firm. "If they will even slightly change their paradigm they may find a world of opportunities there."

BRAC is the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, a program that has resulted in a big build-up at Camp Lejeune and encompasses the transfer of the U.S. Army Forces Command and headquarters of the U.S. Army Reserve Command to Fort Bragg. With that come 50,000 more troops and 30 to 35 generals.

"We've been encouraging our members in the construction industry for more than a year now, to get actively engaged in the opportunities being offered through BRAC," Donna Girardot, executive officer of the Wilmington-Cape Fear Home Builders Association, said Monday.

"There are a wide variety of opportunities for businesses offering many different services and products, including subcontractors like builders, electricians, plumbers, landscapers.

"We've had a large business come to town and that large business is BRAC. More of our local businesses need to take advantage of it."

The opportunities to be part of the \$750 million in business at Lejeune and Cherry Point are numerous, according the Sundt.

The company will be building barracks, bachelor enlisted quarters and training facilities, Casey Sundt, subcontractor recruiter for the company, said Monday.

"We're looking for all trades – painters, mechanical, electrical," he said

Sundt explained that there are set-asides for small businesses, businesses owned by service disabled veterans, woman-owned companies and HUB – historically underutilized businesses.

The troop build-up at Lejeune is

essentially over. But the Sundt contract indicates that the spending is hardly finished.

"I do feel certain that businesses across the country are moving to North Carolina," Perdue said – "little companies who have come to open up little offices around Fort Bragg," which will be home to 30 to 35 generals. They will be the decision-makers on all manner of things, including a great deal of the business opportunities.

"The construction industry is robust in those communities, and we see expansion of jobs and business. I hope that businesses, via the Military Business Center and the Military Foundation, will seek the opportunity to expand," the governor said.

The construction industry, which once employed at least one in five people in the Wilmington area, has shrunk to less than half that size, according to William "Woody" Hall, an economist at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

But the military contracts – hundreds of them are still out for bid – run the gamut from a day spa at Bragg to dredging of waterways.

But he emphasized that "The businesses here in New Hanover can't wait for Fort Bragg or Lejeune to drive down here to look for us," said T.A. "Micky" Finn, strategic programs consultant for the Military Business Center in Wilmington. "We need to go up there and look for them. We need to tell them what we can do."

Lejeune and Fort Bragg are targeting North Carolina companies, Finn said. "Procurement (officers) are using MatchForce.org to look for small business, for work they need to have performed on a local basis," he said.

Companies and individuals can register on the site to create a profile, access government contracts and purchasing opportunities and find employees.

"If you're not on MatchForce," Finn said, "they don't even know they're looking."