

Government

\$15.4M from feds to 'jump start' BRAC-related transit improvements

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As businesses and government officials all across the state prepare for the influx of jobs and population that will come with the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure process, top Maryland lawmakers are worried about how everyday people are going to get from point A to point B.

Speaking at a BRAC symposium in Ellicott City on Monday, Democratic Sen. Barbara Mikulski announced that she had obtained \$15.4 million in earmarked federal funds for BRAC-related transportation improvements as part of a spending bill that was signed into law by President Bush on Dec. 26.

Mikulski laid out what she described as "the path forward" for Maryland, identifying four pillars on which BRAC will rest: physical infrastructure; intellectual capital; the utility grid; and broadband services.

"We have one of the most fantastic economies in the country ... and the federal government is a prime mover," she said. "Because of BRAC, with a recession maybe coming, while the rest of America gets pneumonia, the [Baltimore-Washington] corridor will just get a cold."

Experts have estimated that BRAC will draw 60,000 new jobs and 28,000 new households to Maryland, starting as early as 2009, and how to accommodate this influx, transportation-wise, has been at the forefront of many discussions of BRAC.

"Transportation is a problem in Maryland with or without BRAC," Mikulski said. "BRAC just compounds the problem."

State Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari, in his address to the same audience, expressed concern about "high-end projects," or road repairs and reconstructions that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and sometimes take as long as a decade to complete. Adding a lane to a major highway like Interstate 95 would be an example of a high-end project than may be necessary to accommodate the new BRAC arrivals.

"These jobs are arriving in 2009," he said. "That's tomorrow morning in transportation planning terms. ... We need to stage these improvements so we don't tie the area up in knots."

Many officials and experts have expressed the concern that \$15.4 million is not nearly enough to address the transportation improvement needs that BRAC will bring with it.

"It wasn't the funding we wanted," Mikulski said, "but we did what we could and I'm proud of the investment we made in Maryland priorities."

Terry Neimeyer, CEO of Hunt Valley-based KCI Technologies Inc., a consulting and engineering company, said that the \$15.4 million isn't enough, but it is a "jump start" for the transportation improvement process.

"Something's better than nothing," he said.

The money could be used to pay for feasibility studies and preliminary engineering of the actual improvements that the state needs, he said.

The earmarked funds will be divided among a number of projects to improve transportation infrastructure near BRAC



facilities: \$9.8 million for MARC train improvements; \$2.2 million to improve intersections around Aberdeen Proving Ground; nearly \$2 million to improve intersections near the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda; and just over \$1 million for projects near Fort George Meade in Anne Arundel County.

Donald C. Fry, president and CEO of the Greater Baltimore Committee, said he thought that the MARC funding is particularly important.

"Some of the projects that have been identified are clearly integral to the needs of BRAC," he said. "Fifteen million is a good beginning for us."