

The State

[Next Story >](#)

Holland: Now more than ever, Harvest Hope needs help to feed hungry

Coble: How Ike McLeese saved Fort Jackson

Published: October 30, 2013

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google Plus](#) [Reddit](#) [E-mail](#) [Print](#)



Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce President Ike McLeese chats with U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. in a 2009 reception in Columbia. ERIK CAMPOS — photos@thestate.com | [Buy Photo](#)

By Bob Coble — Guest Columnist

Our community lost a great leader this week with the passing of Ike McLeese, chief executive of the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce since 1994. Ike will be remembered for many achievements, but guiding the Midlands through the 2005 BRAC process will be his legacy.

The Base Realignment and Closure Commission was our federal government's response to the need, after the Cold War had ended, to make our military infrastructure more efficient. More than 350 military installations were closed in the five BRAC rounds from 1989 to 2005. Politics were removed in large measure by replacing what had been congressional decisions with the BRAC process that required Congress to reject or approve the entire package of recommendations, without amendment.

BRAC posed a real danger to the Columbia region's economy with the enormous military presence of Fort Jackson. A USC study in 2004 found that the total impact of the military on businesses in the Midlands amounted to \$2.8 billion each year, and the economic activity helped support 55,500 jobs and \$1.9 billion in personal income. Fort Jackson was and is the single largest employer in the Midlands.

In the early 2000s it was not at all certain that Fort Jackson and McEntire would survive the BRAC review. The McEntire Joint National Guard Base was considered vulnerable to being absorbed by nearby Shaw Air Force Base.

Ike McLeese, knowing the risk to our region's economy, went to work. He learned how the BRAC process worked and educated the business community about the risk to Fort Jackson and McEntire. Ike developed a strategy that highlighted Columbia as the most military-friendly city in the country. He worked with state Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom, who did an outstanding job leading the statewide effort. Ike identified and secured the funding to hire the Rhoads Group (now Cassidy & Associates), the best Washington experts on BRAC. Everyone did a great job in making sure the Pentagon had all the information about the strengths of Fort Jackson and McEntire.

The BRAC decision — ironically on a Friday, May 13, 2005 — was the largest economic development announcement in the history of the Midlands. Not only did we survive, we grew. Fort Jackson and McEntire added 1,715 jobs, and Shaw Air Force Base, which had a separate BRAC effort lead by Sumter officials, added 1,457 jobs. Fort Jackson received three new missions: the Army's Drill Sergeant's School, expansion of the Army Chaplain School to include all service branches and the relocation of the Army's 81st Regional Support Command, which oversees Army reserve units in 15 states and Puerto Rico.

The economic impact of the BRAC decision in 2005 goes beyond the direct military spending and jobs. The fort, the Army's largest basic training facility, is in the middle of \$1 billion worth of construction projects through 2017. It graduates about 50,000 soldiers a year, and 50,000 families travel to Columbia for the graduation ceremonies, staying in local hotels, buying meals and enjoying the area's sites and attractions.

Ike McLeese did an outstanding job leading our community through the BRAC process 10 years ago. Unfortunately there are new dangers for Columbia's economy and our military installations. Our country's military is going through a transformation that will see the Army reducing the number of brigade combat teams and overall size. These developments, exacerbated by sequestration, could result in another round of BRAC as soon as 2015.

We must all build on Ike's efforts and plans and be prepared to defend Fort Jackson and all our military installations. Ike would expect no less.

Mr. Coble, a Columbia attorney, served as mayor from 1990 through 2010; contact him at bcoble@nexasenpruet.com.

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google Plus](#) [Reddit](#) [E-mail](#) [Print](#)