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Education, health care, insurance and defense

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BY CATHY JETT

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Despite paring costs by not filling some vacancies, the Stafford County school system remains the biggest employer in the Fredericksburg area.

Its 30 schools employ about 4,100 people, from maintenance crews to the superintendent. That's kept the school system in the No. 1 spot since 2005, when it beat out current second-place holder Geico, according to the Virginia Employment Commission.

The VEC's list of the biggest employers in the George Washington Regional Commission's coverage area serves as a barometer for economic changes here.

Over the past five years, education, medical services, the U.S. Department of Defense, Geico and Wal-Mart have been economic stalwarts, while the FBI has jumped from 18th place in 2006 to hold and retain the No. 5 spot for the past two years. (The VEC's most current data are for the third quarter of 2008.)

Meanwhile Lowe's and Home Depot saw their rankings slip as the construction industry slowed, and Giant Food saw its position rise after opening one new superstore each in Stafford and Spotsylvania counties.

Some companies such as Capital One dropped off the list completely when it moved out of the area.

"Health care and education are the two things now that are still growing, probably about the only two industries that are growing, in the Fredericksburg area," said William Mezger, the VEC's chief economist.

More people have headed back to school to get degrees or learn new skills during the economic downturn, he said. And, while some have lost their health insurance along with their jobs, a big portion of the population still has coverage.



TOP-RANKING AREA EMPLOYERS						
	2008	'07	'06	'05	'04	'03
Stafford county schools	1	1	1	1	2	2
Geico	2	2	2	3	1	1
Department of Defense	3	3	3	2	3	3
Mary Washington Hospital	4	4	4	4	4	4
Federal Bureau of Investigation	5	5	18	N/A	N/A	N/A
Spotsylvania County School Board	6	6	5	5	5	5
Wal-Mart	7	7	5	6	6	6
County of Stafford	8	8	8	7	9	8
County of Spotsylvania	9	10	9	8	8	9
Food Lion	10	9	7	9	7	7

Source: Virginia Employment Commission. ON-BEHALF OF THE VIRGINIA EMPLOYMENT COMMISSION

"That industry doesn't suffer as much in a downturn since people are still going to request services," Mezger said. "The new hospitals will help, too, of course."

The Fredericksburg area's three military bases also provide thousands of jobs, and both directly and indirectly through defense contractors such as Northrop Grumman and the retailers, restaurants and service industries that their employees patronize.

"Generally, employment is increasing at most of the military bases, and with [the Base Realignment and Closure Commission job shifts], there are some expansions at Quantico, Mezger said.

It also doesn't hurt that the FBI, which has an academy at Quantico, is currently undergoing one of the largest hiring blitzes in its 100-year history. It's seeking 2,100 professional staff employees and 850 special agents nationwide.

Lindsay Godwin, public affairs specialist for the FBI's Washington field office, said about 300 of these will be assigned to the FBI's office in Manassas but didn't know how many addition employees might go to Quantico.

"The hiring blitz at the beginning of the year has brought about a new realization about working for the FBI and where our field offices are located," she said. "Knowing that there is a presence at Quantico might make it resonate more due to the blitz."

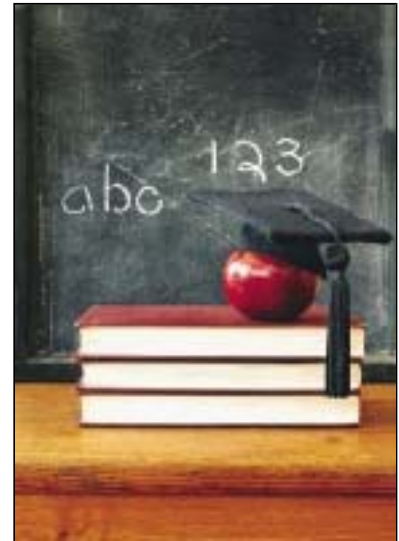
Fredericksburg is fortunate that it has a diverse mix of employers, said Todd Gillingham, the Fredericksburg Regional Alliance's assistant marketing director. And the industries that have been the foundation of the area's economy--education, health care, defense and retail--will remain so.

But that doesn't mean more employers aren't on the horizon.

"Projects are starting to pick back up, but it's the people who waited," he said. "The companies that are financially sound are making the moves and taking advantage of distressed land and lower building costs. A lot of them want incentives; they're saying, 'How bad do you want this business or economic development?'"

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STAFFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS

The system has been the top employer since 2005.

GEICO

The insurer has been in the top three among area employers since 2003.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Three military bases ensure that Defense ranks high.

MARY WASHINGTON HOSPITAL

The area's largest hospital has been No. 4 every year.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

The FBI has jumped from 18th in 2006 to No. 5.



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