

Macon, Georgia

Middle Georgia, the Military, and Transportation

Like many places in the Southeast, Macon, Georgia's economy has been shaped by three forces: cotton, the United States military, and the interstate highway system.

Two of the three elements—the military and the transportation network—are still critical to Macon and middle Georgia. Although Macon's location at the junction of two interstates remains an advantage, the long-range future of the military presence is unclear. Meanwhile, a growing health care industry and employment at local colleges and technical schools have helped to balance the local economy.

Without question, no economic element is more important to middle Georgia than Robins Air Force Base. As the nation entered World War II, Robins opened south of Macon to maintain airplanes. The base remains Georgia's largest industrial complex, with 24,692 employees, including about 18,000 civilians, according to the base's 2012 economic impact statement. Because the federal government's Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) scrutinizes military installations for cost savings, the future of Robins is a serious concern. Base officials, along with local political leaders and economic developers, are positioning Robins to remain viable, as they also work to limit the effects of likely downsizing, said Mike Dyer, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce.

For example, in evaluating the future of its installations, the Pentagon considers "encroachment areas." In other words,



bases are more likely to be closed or shrunk if they are hemmed in by development and thus restricted in their missions because of the noise or hazards they present to civilians. To try to lessen that concern at Robins, the Macon Chamber, local governments, and other entities have allocated funds to buy land near the base.

"The base has to make sense in the military system," said Pat Topping, senior vice president of the Macon Economic Development Commission. "And the community's role is to try to eliminate things outside the fence that could affect the BRAC process."

A wider Panama Canal could float Macon's boat

Transportation infrastructure is a very stable asset. Several years after Robins opened, construction of the interstate highways began. Macon's location at the junction of interstates 75 and 16 has helped the city attract distribution centers for large companies, including Bass Pro Shop, Kohl's, and Sara Lee. Another, Tractor Supply Company, a Tennessee-based chain of farm supply stores, plans to soon open a 14-acre distribution center along I-75 that will employ 200 people.

Economic developers, however, are thinking bigger. In the coming years, they hope to position Macon as an inland port complementing the Port of Savannah, a major container seaport on the Georgia coast. Ideally, cargo arriving from Savannah by rail and truck could be processed through customs in Macon and then sent toward its final destination. For now, the inland port concept depends on a hefty increase in the volume of Macon-bound cargo from Savannah, Topping said.



Macon (left) and nearby Robins Air Force Base (below, showing maintenance on a Lockheed C-5 transport aircraft) have long shared a symbiotic relationship.



Macon, Georgia

Population	91,969
Bibb County population	155,547
Total housing units	43,175
Median household income	\$26,545
Median home value	\$90,300

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007–11 American Community Survey

A key to such a boost in cargo is the anticipated deepening of the Savannah port. Port officials want to expand the harbor to accommodate the larger ships that will traverse the Panama Canal when it is widened, a project scheduled to be finished in 2015 (see the third-quarter 2010 issue of *EconSouth*, “Full Steam Ahead: Southeast Ports Prepare for Panama Canal Expansion”). Macon ideally would serve as a sort of relief valve for a busier Port of Savannah. If more and larger container ships steam into Savannah, some cargo could be immediately loaded on trains and sent to Macon, thus relieving congestion at the seaport.

“There are a lot of ifs that could take place,” Topping said. “And if that happens, we would be more attractive as an inland port.”

Home to considerable history

Macon actually traces its roots to waterborne commerce. Incorporated in 1823—14 years before Atlanta—Macon initially thrived as a hub for trading and shipping cotton grown in the fertile middle Georgia soil. The Ocmulgee River and then railroads made Macon a cotton transport center during the 1800s and early 1900s. The city subsequently took its place as a locus of textile manufacturing, starting

in earnest in the 1870s with the founding of Bibb Manufacturing Company.

Cotton culture brought Macon “substantial wealth, war, and subsequently genteel poverty for its first 100-plus years,” according to the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

World War II changed that. Robins—just south of Macon—brought an influx of people and money. The base’s significance was the reason its hometown, the once-tiny town of Wellston, was in 1945 renamed Warner Robins, after General Augustine Warner Robins, a logistics pioneer in the Air Force for whom the base is named. Warner Robins grew sufficiently so that in 2003 the Office of Management and Budget designated it a stand-alone metropolitan statistical area (MSA), separate from the Macon MSA.

As Warner Robins continued to add population and jobs through the late 20th and early 21st centuries—primarily at and around Robins—Macon continued to have a stable economy.

Yet Macon’s manufacturing sector shrank. The portion of factory jobs as a share of total nonfarm employment in the Macon metro area is roughly half the share for Georgia as a whole and the United States, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Textile

mills faded from the scene during the late 20th century, as they did throughout the Southeast. Another blow to the local manufacturing economy came in 2006, when Brown & Williamson Tobacco merged with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company and closed a cigarette production plant that employed 2,100 people.

Education and health services have helped to fill the void. Over the past 10 years, Macon’s education and health services employment rose about 25 percent, to more than 20,000 jobs, even as overall employment fell slightly. Over a longer horizon, the story is the same. Education and health care jobs since 1990 have grown by 58 percent in Macon, far outpacing total employment growth of 13 percent. As of June 2013, the education and health category accounts for 21 percent of Macon’s jobs, a far bigger slice than the category claims statewide, at 13 percent, and nationally, at 15 percent.

While the immediate outlook for Macon’s health care sector is murky amid adjustments brought on by health care reform, the long-term outlook is bright. “Mainly, there will be a push to increase efficiency, and as a result, in the short term, there might be some consolidation of facilities and reductions in employment,” said Aleksandar (Sasha) Tomic, a visiting assistant professor of economics at Mercer University in Macon. “But once the adjustments are made, over the longer term, there will be plenty of growth.” ■

This article was written by Charles Davidson, a staff writer for EconSouth.