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State should support its military community with employment, housing legislation

by S.C. Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom

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You probably haven't heard much about it, but there's an economic threat to South Carolina lurking on the horizon beyond the latest crises in Washington over the "fiscal cliff" and the federal debt.

While this threat to our state hasn't received much attention or publicity, it's a threatened round of widespread military base closings throughout the nation.

Military officials and other knowledgeable sources believe that it's likely to happen in the near future, possibly as soon as 2015.

While that sounds a long way off, if South Carolina is to preserve its military resources, which have a huge economic impact on the state, leaders must begin laying the groundwork immediately to combat this threat of losing military bases.

One of the ways to do this is for the General Assembly to pass military-friendly legislation that some lawmakers have put forth.

Let me say at the outset that the Legislature has a very good track record in this area, and I really applaud its members — from the leadership to rank-and-file legislators — for passing measures to support our state's military members, their families, and their communities.

A couple of examples I would give are measures that passed last year and are effective now: One of them continues in-state college tuition rates for dependents of military members after members get transferred outside the state. Another provides temporary professional licenses to spouses of military personnel if they already hold a comparable license issued by another state. This bill helps spouses compete for suitable employment once they arrive, and it helps the state by increasing the availability of skilled talent.

These new laws help members of the military and their families who are stationed in South Carolina, removing some of the obstacles they would otherwise face with education and employment in our state.

As chairman of the South Carolina Military Base Task Force, which works to preserve and enhance our state's military resources, I can tell you firsthand that measures like these really do positively impact those serving in uniform in our state.

However, we always need to do more.

The whole idea is to take good care of our military community — active-duty personnel, their families, and even military retirees — and create an atmosphere to help them feel welcomed, appreciated, and supported.

This accomplishes a few things.

First, it shows that we genuinely support our troops, beyond just organizing parades and warm welcomes.

Second, it helps to improve the quality of life for our troops and their families, which can make them more productive and encourage them to make South Carolina their permanent home one day.

Third, it enhances the military value of our bases, showing decision-makers at the Pentagon that our bases are supported at the local and state levels in ways that make a real difference to the installations and the folks who operate them. In fact, the Department of Defense tracks this type of legislation.

That way, when that next round of base closings does come along, we'll be in a better position to safeguard our installations from being shuttered or downsized.

By accomplishing all of these things, we also protect the huge economic impact on our state of the military.

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This past November, the S.C. Department of Commerce released a study showing that the military generated \$15.7 billion in economic activity in South Carolina during 2011, supporting more than 138,000 jobs throughout the state.

I spoke at the press conference when we released the study, and let me tell you: If those numbers don't convey the significance of the military to our economy, the fact that nearly 10 media outlets covered the event underscores the point – newspapers as well as TV and radio stations and The Associated Press.

So, let me leave you with a couple of specific bills that the General Assembly could pass and send to Gov. Nikki Haley to help make South Carolina the most military-friendly state in the nation.

One of the bills expands on one of the measures passed last year by allowing military personnel to receive college credit and civilian occupational licensing for courses completed and training mastered as part of their military service.

Another bill addresses active-duty service members who get transferred out of state and are then forced to rent out their homes because they cannot sell them. The bill would allow them to pay their property taxes at "owner-occupied" rates, versus having to pay at the much higher "rental property" rates.

It's no secret I'm a Republican. But this is a bipartisan cause: Rep. James Smith, a Democrat from Columbia, is often the main sponsor of bills like these that support our military, as is Rep. Murrell Smith, a Republican from Sumter.

Bipartisan — that's the way it should be when it comes to supporting our military community.

— *Richard Eckstrom is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S.C. State Guard.*

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