

Business Leader - February 2007

Quality of life drives business strategy in Moore County

By Joan Plotnick

Quality of life clearly is Moore County's ace in the hole. Long known as the "Home of American Golf," it boasts 43 prestigious courses designed by such legends as Donald Ross, Tom Fazio, Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer. But quality of life goes well beyond golf. It is this quality of life that civic leaders capitalize on when attracting new businesses to the community. "Quality of life is primarily our competitive advantage," says Ray Ogden, executive director of Moore County Partners in Progress.

"The golf atmosphere is wonderful, but it goes beyond that. The public schools are superb; we have one of the best community colleges in the state and a nationally ranked health-care system. Our property tax is in the lowest 10th of the state, and our crime rate also is well below that of surrounding areas, certainly the urban areas." Statistics back up Ogden's claim:

- **Public education.** Almost 70 percent of the county's 22 schools have been named "Schools of Excellence" or "Schools of Distinction" by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. Pinecrest High School was honored in a May 2006 Newsweek article, "What Makes High Schools Great."
- **Health care.** FirstHealth of the Carolinas, headquartered in Moore County, recently ranked in the top 3.3 percent of hospitals nationwide for clinical excellence. The ratio of doctors to the population-at-large is 40 percent higher than the state average.
- **Property taxes.** The current rate of \$0.4550 is the 10th-lowest rate in the state.
- **Crime.** The crime rate is almost 40 percent less than the state average.
- **Recreation.** In addition to golf, Moore County is a nationally recognized center for equestrian activities and is home to much of the state's pottery corridor.
- **Culture.** The county offers regional theaters and visiting performances by the N.C. Symphony, as well as the Weymouth Center for Arts and Humanities, Kelly's Classic Automobile Museum and the 32-acre Sandhills Horticulture Garden at Sandhills Community College.

Cultivating relationships

"In today's world, people can run a business from wherever they want to be," Ogden says. "This is where they want to be." There's always a danger that attracting new residents and businesses can destroy the quality of life that drew people to Moore County in the first place. It's one of the reasons the county's economic developers are focused on attracting entrepreneurs and small- to medium-sized businesses. Fred Hobbs, a partner at consulting engineering firm Hobbs, Upchurch and Associates PA, refers to the strategy as "pro-growth with planned evaluation." "We want good jobs with good wages, and we want businesses that are stable and not cyclical.

We have seen what happens when large corporations have to move or consolidate," says Hobbs, who also is chairman of the Moore County Partners in Progress. "That is one reason Partners in Progress focuses on small business. Not only is it achievable, but the community-at-large is not interested in 250,000-square-foot plants with 1,000 employees," he adds. "We focus on entrepreneurs because they are stable and are compatible with our communities." The strategy seems to be working.

Most new businesses in Moore County employ between 10 and 100 employees, and the county is growing at a steady rate of 2 to 3 percent per year. With the exception of FirstHealth of the

Carolinas, with 2,850 employees, and Pinehurst Resorts, with 1,300 employees, no major employer has more than 522 employees. Almost every company quoted in promotional literature and the local newspaper "The Pilot" mentions quality of life as a motivating factor for locating to Moore County. An example is PACE, a 50-year-old privately held international company that manufactures industrial-soldering equipment. In 2005, it opened a 16,000-square-foot facility in Southern Pines, which initially employed 35 people.

It plans to increase to 40,000 square feet in two years and eventually reach 100 employees. "My wife and I have personal friends who live here, and they have been trying to persuade us for some time to move here as well," says Paul Dunham, president and chief operations officer. "After investigating the opportunity further and seeing what a lovely place it is here, we felt it was in the best interest of the company to consider moving a portion of our business to Moore County." Quality of life also drew Hobbs' firm to the area. He says affordable housing and a good school system make it easy for him to recruit engineers to his company. "If you accept the premise that the era of heavy manufacturing is largely over in the continental U.S., the next wave is intelligence-based businesses," he says. "They can be anywhere.

This is a good place to be." Pinehurst is well-known as a retirement mecca; about 22 percent of the town's population is over 65 years old. Ogden insists that retirees are not a drain on the local economy; rather, they draw businesses to the area, and many retirees start their own businesses there. Wexford Group International, a provider of process-improvement and re-engineering services to business and government clients worldwide, is one example. Ogden says one of the prime reasons CEO Lieut. Gen. Bill Reno, retired, choose to locate in Moore County is the availability of well-trained retiring military workers from nearby Fort Bragg.

Helping businesses succeed

Worker-training programs also are available to area businesses through Sandhills Community College, one of a handful of educational institutions nationwide that offers a specialized Entrepreneurship Program. The one- to two-year program includes a mix of coursework, hands-on experience, mentoring opportunities, and an opportunity for participants to present business plans to professionals and investors in the community for evaluation. "Their customized training is truly extraordinary," Ogden says. "One of the great strengths and reasons to come here is the capability to find and train people. If SCC is not our most important partner, it's right up there.

The president of the college is on our board, and the college is extraordinarily responsive to business needs." Location is another of Moore County's calling cards. It is about an hour to Raleigh, 35 minutes to Fort Bragg, and about two hours to Greensboro and Charlotte. The Moore County Airport provides facilities for private planes, as well as Delta Airlines commercial service to Atlanta from May to November. The county recently opened two new business parks, one geared toward lighter industry and the other toward heavier industries needing rail access. The Southern Pines Corporate Park offers 105 acres of land facing U.S. 1 North.

It is designed to serve light manufacturing, assembly, research and intensive commercial users. It also is a state-designated economic-development zone, which allows qualified companies to apply for tax credits. The 125-acre Iron Horse Industrial Park in Aberdeen is a client-ready site with rail service. As a state-certified industrial park, the site has been pre-qualified as meeting all applicable environmental regulations. "You put it all together, and you find this to be a great place to live," Ogden says. "We find people saying, 'Yeah, I'd like to live here. Why not run a business here?' And they find that they can."