

From *Carolina Business*
August, 2008 issue

Moore County - A Fine Place To Live

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Moore County, located in the Sandhills region of the state, has much to recommend it as a good place to live and to retire. The southern half of the county is the spot most often chosen by retirees from all over the United States, with a fair number of retired military personnel, as well as men and women who have served the government in various capacities, including the State Department, or been active in corporate affairs.

The population of the county is estimated to have grown by 10,000 over the course of the last ten years, and numbers just under 84,000. However, the influx of new residents isn't all retirees.

Military families from nearby Fort Bragg have joined physicians and other medical staff and their families drawn by the county's burgeoning health care industry in choosing a Moore County residence. Add to this the young professionals who with technology find it easier to do business or run a business from an off-site location. They like the first-rate school system, the low crime rate, the outstanding leisure activities, and the family-oriented neighborhoods with housing prices in a reasonable range.

There are thirteen small cities and towns from which to choose. Carthage is the county seat, and the southern part of the county (Southern Pines, Pinehurst and Aberdeen) is the retail and business core. The central positioning of the county is another advantage. With Raleigh and RDU International Airport and I-95 just an hour away, Charlotte two hours, and midway between the mountains and the ocean, there is a wide choice for residents wanting to travel or do business in and out of state.

The Moore County school system and Sandhills Community College, both of which are the primary components of the county's outstanding educational facilities, were the beneficiaries last fall of a referendum approved by the voters of \$69.5 million for education bonds. The bond issue is for capital improvements to the system and the college.

The school district's Master Plan includes a new elementary and a new middle school, as well as classroom additions to four elementary schools, and improvements to athletic facilities at all middle and high schools. Offering a comprehensive curriculum that incorporates workforce development, programs for special needs and gifted students and arts education, the Moore County school district also provides Advanced Placement courses at all of its three high schools, and the International Baccalaureate Program at Pinecrest High School. It should also be noted that the district's 2007 SAT average of 1554 exceeded the national average by 43 points.



Dr. Susan Purser, Superintendent, commented on the community-wide support that the bond measure received. “So many civic groups, organizations and individuals ‘went to bat’ for us on this much-needed referendum and we certainly thank them.”

The approval of the bond issue was unfortunately not accompanied by approval by the voters for the land transfer tax which would have paid for the debt service on the bonds, and T. Cary McSwain, County Manager, observes that early financial projections called for a property tax increase to fund the new debt service payments of seven (7) cents.

The school system and the college, however, only asked for an initial sale of \$40 million of the bonds. With the new figure in mind, county officials met with Standard & Poor’s and Moody’s credit rating agencies and presented the county’s financial position. Included in the presentation was the fact that the county has established a written financial policy regarding a solid fund balance to assure the credit worthiness of the county. As a result of these meetings, the county’s credit rating was improved from an A to an AA.

McSwain says that the lower interest rate commensurate with the better credit rating will save hundreds of thousands of dollars over the twenty-year life of the bonds sold and for future bond issues, as well. And consequently, the Moore County tax rate climbed to \$0.504, from the previous year’s \$0.475, or a total increase of just 2.9 cents.

The Moore County 2008-2009 budget provides a new capital reserve of \$4.1 million, which will allow the county to begin to plan future pay-as-you-go projects without tax increases, such as three new necessary buildings for the county: a general government building for the various county agencies; a public safety building; and a detention center.

The infrastructure of the county during the last few years has been upgraded with major renovations to various county buildings, sewer line replacements, work at the wastewater treatment plant, and water-related projects including installation of water lines and connections in several locations.

The question of water still remains a topic of concern. Patrick Coughlin, President of the Moore County Chamber of Commerce, points out that most of Moore County is in stage two of water restrictions and under a mandate to cut back on usage by 30%.

As Coughlin explains, “One of the things that makes a chamber viable is the degree of its community involvement, and in that regard, the Moore Chamber was one of the founding organizations of a forum called the Moore County Summit. It is a venue where all the elected officials from each part of the county come together to address the problems and issues that are important to the county as a whole.”

“Water is not a problem that individual communities are going to solve. It’s going to take joint action looking at the county as a whole.” For that reason, the Summit has formed a water task force of about twenty-five people who represent the homebuilders association, landscapers, the business community, together with elected officials.

Moore County isn’t the only North Carolina county where innovation is used to improve the lifestyle of its citizens, but one of the better examples of finding new and better ways of delivering services is First Health of Carolinas. From its base in Moore County, the three hospitals and 4,000 employees of this innovative health care system serve residents and visitors in 15 counties.

Moore Regional Hospital in Pinehurst, the system's flagship hospital, is a 372-bed facility offering a broad spectrum of specialties and a full range of health care benefits. In both scope and quality, its services match those typically associated with university medical centers and large urban hospitals.

In a step designed to improve hospital care, for instance, a few years ago at Moore Regional a hospitalist program was put in place and has met with success. A hospitalist is an internal medicine physician whose sole responsibility is caring for hospital patients. They provide around-the-clock care, ensuring follow-up on tests and treatments and supplementing the role of the primary care physician.

Another exciting addition to Moore Regional Hospital's facilities is The Heart Institute, on which construction will soon begin. The state-of-the-art facility slated to open early in 2010 will physically integrate cardiovascular services that Moore Regional has been providing for a number of years to give more efficient and cost-effective care in a single location for outpatient and diagnostic services, treatment and research programs. Innovative new surgical suites will accommodate cutting-edge cardiovascular, thoracic, neurosurgery and other surgical specialties supporting the latest technological advances.

The progressive stance of many Moore County citizens is a significant component in its quality of life. From the individual farmer like Carthage resident Joe Picariello who is experimenting with raising alpacas and joining the agri-tourism segment, to the officials of Robbins who have made important strides in their attempts to turn around the economy of that small town, novel ways to improve the status quo have become the benchmark.

Robbins, incidentally, is one of the two most successful towns taking part in the statewide project, NCStep, an acronym for North Carolina Small Towns Economic Prosperity, and through the program has received grants allowing it to focus on building a tourism base, refurbishing the town's railroad depot, and the repair and maintenance of the town's water system.

A Moore County entity that is endeavoring to raise the public perception of its programs is the Arts Council. Although it is located in Southern Pines, it is truly a county-wide operation, and has been presenting a wide variety of arts-related activities for more than thirty-five years. A quick example is the annual presentation of a professional performing artist or company in every Moore County school.

Recently, funding for this non-profit organization received a setback when the town of Southern Pines, a longtime benefactor, cut the amount it ordinarily gave the Council on an annual basis by half. According to Chris Dunn, the Council's executive director, among other ways they will deal with the cutback, "We will have to do a better job of telling the story of what we do, which will hopefully increase our membership - since all of Moore County benefits from the Arts Council's programs."

Patrick Coughlin, President of the Moore County Chamber, sees another challenge facing the county in the future, and that lies in developing leadership. He believes, "It is essential to create a cadre of leaders in political office, in churches, in businesses, in the non-profit sector that can look beyond tomorrow and look ahead five or ten years, so that we can become a more integrated community with leaders interacting for the common good and thus giving us a better chance for success."

Coughlin's desires for leadership development have been getting a partial answer from a business boot camp run earlier this summer for nineteen rising high school seniors, co-sponsored by the Chamber, the Moore County school system and Methodist College in Fayetteville. In addition, Cary McSwain, county manager, points to a Leadership Class of Kids Government 101 that has more than 40 enrollees for an August program at the county level.

McSwain started Government 101 about twenty years ago in Gaston County and continued it in Richland County before coming to Moore County, where he found the Cooperative Extension was already having summer programs for kids with some overlap in what he envisioned, and they worked together to create additional opportunities for the youth. Also, the county has interfaced with the adult programs being offered by the League of Women Voters so that the classes are complementary and not duplicative.

"All in all," McSwain says, "we are trying to get to a more participatory government with citizens knowledgeable about their county government and interested in its issues. How wonderful it would be if all our citizens spent time with our top county department executives and learned more about the operations, expenditures, costs, mandates, problems, short falls and successes!"

Reprinted from Carolina Business online.