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Ranking Shows Economic Strength of Area

By Ted M. Natt, Jr.

The Southern Pines-Pinehurst area is ranked 34th out of 576 U.S. "micropolitan statistical areas," an indication that Moore County has weathered the economic downturn well.

"The diversity in our economy kept us from having the wild swings that other communities experienced during the recession due to their dependence on one or two key industries," said Ray Ogden, executive director of Moore County Partners in Progress. "We've been able to maintain a more even keel."

The 2011 Economic Strength Rankings were released this past week by Policom Corp., a Florida-based independent economic research firm that analyzes local and state economies to determine if a particular economy is growing or declining and why.

"There was a lot of volatility this time around," Policom President William Furth said. "The cities hurt the most were booming before the downturn."

Even though Southern Pines-Pinehurst fell from 24th in 2010 to 34th this year, Furth called the drop "statistically insignificant."

"You're basically where you were before," he said. "It indicates a stable local economy. The only reason for the lower ranking is either minor slippage or other micros have done a little better and moved up."

Micropolitan statistical areas are defined as having a population of at least 10,000 residents but fewer than 50,000. Each area is evaluated based on the long-term tendency of its economy to grow in both size and quality. The higher the ranking, the more constant the growth has been over an extended time.

"The formulas used to determine economic strength measure how the economy has behaved, not what caused it to perform," Furth said. "Policom addresses the condition of an economy from the viewpoint of its impact upon the 'standard of living' of the people who live and work in the area."

Since micros were added to the rankings in 2004, Southern Pines-Pinehurst had been in the top 30 until this year. Of the 26 micros in North Carolina, only Statesville-Mooresville fared better during that time period.

"I think the diversity of our industries, the strength of the medical community and the resiliency of our resort community have helped maintain our high ranking over the years," Ogden said. "This year's ranking affirms what we've been emphasizing to prospective clients all along - we have an exceptional standard of living in Moore County, and it's a great place to start, relocate or expand a business."

Patrick Coughlin, president and CEO of the Moore County Chamber of Commerce, said the consistent rankings are indicative of the area's strength in terms of economic viability, leadership and overall attractiveness.

"To maintain that level, we're continuing to meet high standards of excellence," he said. "It means we have worked that much harder and done a better job. I think it's great news. I'm very pleased. I think it's going to help us a lot."

The same cannot be said of the rankings among neighboring micros. Sanford, which ranked 34th in 2008, is now 121st. Dunn came in at 265th, its lowest ranking ever. Laurinburg and Rockingham finished 491st and 496th, respectively.

The only other bright spot in the Sandhills was Fayetteville, which has climbed since 2004 from 227th out of 366 metropolitan statistical areas nationwide to 92nd. There are 13 metros in North Carolina, and Fayetteville trailed only Charlotte-Gastonia, Raleigh-Cary and Durham-Chapel Hill.

"I think the current ranking reveals one of the reasons Moore County has fared relatively well during these economic conditions compared with some of our neighboring counties," Ogden said. "Our economy was in good shape going into the recession, and I think it will help us to recover more quickly."