

Collision of dynamic forces

Urban Institute study finds Cabarrus' growth, loss a microcosm of entire region

By Josh McCann

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Clockwise from left: Education, economy, environment and transportation were elements of regional trends studied in the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute Regional Indicators Project. Bridgett Baker (bbaker@independenttribune.com)

Jeff Michael, director of the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute, sees Cabarrus as a microcosm of the entire region.

The county has simultaneously experienced particularly intense losses of manufacturing jobs and particularly intense growth in population, Michael said.

"There's just a real collision of two really dynamic forces happening in Cabarrus County," Michael said.

Those two dramatic shifts are evident in the institute's inaugural study of regional trends. Some results show the local economy has rebounded to a position of relative strength, and others show a community straining to handle an influx of newcomers.

The initial version of the Regional Indicators Project examined 54 factors in 10 theme areas in a geographic area that includes 11

counties in North Carolina (Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union) and three in South Carolina (Chester, Lancaster and York).

Directed by an advisory board of regional leaders, organizers plan to release annual updates and additions so the public can track trends over time.

Comparing statistics across the region could help shed light on vexing, important issues, Michael said. One potential example: Why has Gaston, which is a similar distance from Charlotte as Cabarrus and has similar interstate highway access, not experienced such explosive growth?

After this report establishes a baseline, Michael said, future surveys with altered or additional indicators should provide researchers with the opportunity to make some "really exciting" observations.

Here are a few of the first year's findings in some key categories with comments from area leaders:

ECONOMY

- Cabarrus and Union had the lowest unemployment rates in 2006 (4.1 and 4.0 percent, respectively)
- Cabarrus' average annual wages of \$34,320 in 2005 were second only to Mecklenburg's \$49,140.
- Cabarrus' median household income of \$48,446 in 2004 ranked third, behind only Mecklenburg (\$49,683) and Union (\$56,218).

Comments: John Cox, president and CEO of the Cabarrus Regional Chamber of Commerce and Cabarrus Economic Development Corp., said local leaders are working to keep those rankings stable by replacing high-paying jobs the community has lost from major employers such as Philip Morris USA, which will close its Concord plant that employs 2,500 by the end of 2010. "Our recovery is under way," Cox said. "We want to keep focusing on high-tech, high-wage, high knowledge jobs of the 21st century."

EDUCATION

- Among 21 school districts in the region, Cabarrus was one of four singled out for high public school enrollment growth. Stanly was one of three districts to see a decline.
- The percentage of high school graduates pursuing higher education has steadily improved in Kannapolis, but that district still lagged slightly behind Cabarrus County Schools' average in 2004-2005. Both districts' levels were lower than the regional average.

Comments: Ellen Boyd, community relations director for Kannapolis City Schools, said the institute's data demonstrated a rising interest in higher education that has only accelerated with the development of the North Carolina Research Campus biotechnology center. In the past, further schooling was not essential to

work in the area's textile mills, but Kannapolis' A.L. Brown High has started several programs recently to better prepare and inspire students, both for biotech and other careers, Boyd said. "Basically, the entire period of the study predated even the thought of a research campus," Boyd said. "All of that has changed."

ENVIRONMENT

- Rowan recorded the lowest average daily water consumption per person for 2002, followed by Cleveland, Cabarrus, Iredell and Union. Stanly was the highest at 266.3 gallons per person per day. Catawba County, home to many foes of Concord and Kannapolis' interbasin water transfer request, was fourth highest.
- Cabarrus recorded the highest per capita waste disposal rate among the region's North Carolina counties in 2006. The county produced more than 5,000 pounds per person in 2006, when no other county in the region topped 4,000. The size of that disparity can likely be attributed to the demolition of the Pillowtex site, but Cabarrus' rates were also the highest in the region for the two prior years, said Vicki Bott, Urban Institute Land Use & Environmental Planning division director.
- Developed acres per capita increased in Cabarrus from 1996-2006, when that figure decreased in Mecklenburg and Union. Those were the only counties for which data were available. That measurement is an indication to Bott that more dense, walkable development is only beginning to catch on in Cabarrus. Cabarrus' increasing number likely shows "recent development is happening on the traditional suburban model" of large subdivisions, she said.

Comments: Pete Pasterz, Cabarrus County waste reduction coordinator, said Cabarrus' high disposal rates could result from the way the statistics are gathered unless they are calculated to accurately reflect the facilities in the county that accept waste generated elsewhere. "I don't know of a factor that would lead me to believe Cabarrus County residents are any more or less wasteful than say Mecklenburg County residents or Stanly County residents," he said. Cabarrus and its municipalities do have less established recycling programs than other areas, however, so some residents may be accustomed to throwing out materials that could be saved, Pasterz said.

TRANSPORTATION

- Cabarrus and Union were the only two counties where at least 47 percent of workers commuted more than 25 minutes in 2000. Bott suspects people are choosing to live in those two places with the intention of driving elsewhere. Commuting times for other outlying counties such as Iredell and Gaston are likely to climb in similar fashion in future studies, Bott said. "The question we need to be asking ourselves is: Will we start to see some really significant employment centers in the counties surrounding Mecklenburg?" Bott said. "That's happening now, but how much more is going to happen?"

Comments: Scott Cole, division traffic engineer for the North Carolina Department of Transportation, said new types of development and alternatives such as telecommuting and traveling at off-peak hours can help frustrated drivers. Even so, he expects commuting times will remain high in such a fast-growing region. "The swelling population just means more people are trying to get to the same place at the same time during peak hours," he said. "The fact is the area is growing much more quickly than the road system."

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