



Changing Picture: Some residents worry about sprawl

As number of residents in King swells, questions about how to fill needs arise

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Work continues on The Village at Moser Farms in King. The project will offer shopping, dining, business and residential lots. (Journal Photo by Jennifer Rotenizer)

KING - There used to be a time that Jack Warren, the mayor of King, knew just about everyone in this small city that straddles Stokes and Forsyth counties.

Not anymore.

Between 1990 and 2004, King's population grew by nearly 2,200 - to 6,256. And the pace shows no sign of slowing.

Across North Carolina, many small cities within easy driving distance of urban centers are swelling. Growth brings convenience, money and energy into such places as King. But it also can generate friction between towns and county governments.

King is no exception.

"The system is the county pays for schools. But most development takes place in and around cities. And as a consequence, most development is controlled by cities," said David Lawrence, a professor of public law and government at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's Institute of Government. "It's a difficult thing from the city's standpoint. It may see more development as a positive thing. The cost of serving that new development may be less than the taxes they take in from it. From the county's standpoint, it may be that the residential development is not enough to pay for the schools."

It has been a continuing struggle in Cabarrus County, which is next to larger, more urban Mecklenburg County as well as in Johnston County, which bumps up next to Wake County, Lawrence said.

"Both of those have real concerns," he said. "Cabarrus has been looking hard at some

kind of county-facilities ordinance. But again, they don't control what the cities do. When most of the growth is residential development and not the commercial or industrial, it is more of a challenge."

In King, there is a mix of lifelong residents and others who have moved in because of easy access to U.S. 52 and jobs in Winston-Salem. The city has steadily been adding residents, but it is now in the midst of a full-fledged building boom. In the next four years, King is forecast to grow by 50 percent, to about 9,000 residents.

"I don't know everyone now, and that's all right," said Mayor Warren, whose city has approved more than 1,500 residential lots and apartment units that will be built in three to five years. "A lot of people don't like change. They want to stay the same size we've always been.... But with the tax base expanding, you can have more things."

Butting heads

As the King City Council has approved development after development, it has put itself at odds with Stokes County commissioners, who say that the county is struggling with how to deal with overcrowded schools in and around King.

Of the countywide school system's 7,450 students, about 48 percent of them live in and around King.

One school, Mount Olive Elementary School just outside of King, was intended for no more than 450 children, but 753 children are enrolled. About half of them attend classes in 17 trailer classrooms that spread across the school's parking lot and playground - a lineup of trailers that some Stokes educators say would by itself make up the third-largest elementary school in the county.

Stokes County officials are considering plans for a new elementary school in the area, but some say that with the kind of growth expected in King in the next five years, one new school would only be a temporary fix.

"I have no dispute with the King city officials. We have to do what we feel is best for the county," said Commissioner Sandy McHugh, who added that most county commissioners tend not to approve housing developments around King because of the added pressure on schools.

"The problem is the property taxes that are paid by homeowners just are not near enough to fund education.... The only way to pay for education is to develop business because business doesn't use up the tax base," McHugh said. "They add to it. Every time you bring in another house that brings in another student, you're getting further behind.

"It's not just a philosophy. There's a list of things that we have to answer," she said.

"Have we considered the impact of this subdivision on the schools, on fire services, on EMS services, on the environment?"

King officials say they give Stokes County officials a five-year plan that includes projected growth, and at quarterly meetings they try to emphasize the numbers of new residents who could be coming.

"The only problem that needs to be addressed is the schools," said Todd Cox, the city's planning director. He contends that Stokes County could have taken steps a few years ago to prevent crowding at some schools.

County commissioners and the county school board recently paid \$25,000 for a demographics study that looked at new-home construction, infrastructure and other topics. A short-term solution is to build an elementary school in the county's southwestern corner near King. That would alleviate overcrowding at King Elementary School, Pinnacle Elementary School and Mount Olive Elementary - all of which are over capacity. The study also raised the possibility of redrawing school-boundary lines.

Some have praised the study and say it will be a useful tool in moving toward a school-bond referendum to pay for a new elementary school as well as renovations to aging schools throughout the county.

McHugh said she thought that the study was a big disappointment, only directing county officials to something they already knew.

What to do?

"Everybody knew we already needed a new elementary school," said McHugh, who is suggesting that the new school be in the middle of the county, along with a new middle school, so that they can draw students from different areas where there is overcrowding.

Another option would be to charge developers a school-impact fee that would go to the schools. The idea has been raised but not seriously discussed, county officials said. Implementing such a fee would require legislative action - King officials say they don't have the authority to push for it.

Lawrence said he recommends that both the city government and the county government sit down together.

"The only thing that they could do is try to communicate, which they sound like they've been doing but not constructively, and see if they can work somehow cooperatively about it," he said.

In the meantime, other developments will be approved in King, city officials say, and as

construction is completed on the more than 1,500 residential lots and apartment units that are already approved, families will continue to move in.

One of the most visible and largest developments under construction - at the corner of N. C. 66 and Mountainview Road - is a 50,000-square-foot shopping center. It is anchored by a Food Lion supermarket and will be surrounded by 82 residential lots and 83 town houses as well as restaurants, businesses and at least one day-care center.

Some residents, who say they often drive to Winston-Salem for groceries, welcome the new shopping center and the possibility of new restaurants and businesses. But they say they also think about the impact on schools.

Losing its flavor

Michael Hartley, a Stokes resident who lives about three miles from the King city limits, said he thinks that the new developments will lead to sprawl and may overrun the rural feel and pace that attracted Hartley to the area in the first place. He and his wife, Martha, moved into Stokes County about 12 years ago from Bethania.

"We have a little bit of land out there" he said. "We keep chickens and ducks. I have a large garden. I have some timber and that sort of thing. I don't want to say that we are farmers. But we very much interested in the rural lifestyle.

"Without careful thought and without some significant planning going on about how things will occur, that southern end of Stokes could become a major area of subdivisions and that will definitely change the character of Stokes County," Hartley said. "And I don't think that's a good thing."

City officials say that, like it or not, areas around the Triad are growing and that King is a part of that growth.

"It's growth whether you look at it as a positive or you look at it as a negative," said Scott Buffkin, the city manager of King. "You can't bury your head in the sand and think it's not going to occur. This is occurring for right, wrong and indifferent.... We have the available land, the infrastructure. You look at other areas around the Triad, the suburban areas around Winston-Salem, and look at all the growth and you project. I think it's certainly within a scope of vision that we have to see that coming and make provisions to be prepared."

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