



Wilson County

BY CANDACE MOONSHOWER

Wilson County has always been known for its rustic quality of life—rolling hills and lovely landscapes with good weather year-round. Living in the three towns of Lebanon, Mt. Juliet and Watertown offered a rural lifestyle within driving distance of the busy, urban activities of nearby Nashville. People lived in Wilson County, but many worked and shopped outside the county. This last fact is something the Joint Economic & Community Development Board (JECDB)—with its mission to attract new investments in the county to keep pace with rapid growth, while maintaining a quality lifestyle—has tirelessly worked to change.

When asked about the phenomenal growth happening all around her and what is going on in her county, Sue Vanatta, president and CEO of the Lebanon/Wilson County Chamber of Commerce asks, “What is not going on?” Vanatta has been with the Chamber for 15 years and credits Wilson County’s location for its amazing growth. But it is growth tempered with quality, Vanatta says, and points to her town of Lebanon, the county seat, as an example. “We still maintain our quaint, hometown atmosphere, but with the fun hustle and bustle of an up and coming little city. People want to live here.”

Just like the fair for which Wilson County is famous—that appears each August as if by magic—new developments, such as Providence Marketplace at Exit 226 off I-40, have sprung up from fields and dirt in a mere couple of years. Developed by Mike McNichols and William Misiaveg of Carolina Holdings of Greenville, S.C., Providence Marketplace is 100-plus acres of commercially zoned property, behind which there are residential lots for more than 3,100 homes.



Five Oaks

“All indications are that the central location and other factors we’ve been building on are making Wilson County a good place to do business.”

—G.C. HIXSON, THE JECDB OF WILSON COUNTY

Del Webb, a developer specializing in communities designed for homeowners aged 55 and over, has purchased 1,069 lots. Their plan—and it’s a good one—is to lure people back from south of Tennessee’s border, retirees who have gone to Florida and other traditional retirement places, and who want to move north (but not too far north), as well as other retirees who are moving into the area.

“This is unscientific,” Mark Hinesley says, “but there’s a definite visible trend.” Hinesley, president and CEO of the Mt. Juliet/West Wilson County Chamber of Commerce, describes the “snowbirds” settling in Wilson County as upper-income, active adults. “These are folks who can live anywhere they want, and they want to live in Wilson County.”

Retirees aren’t the only people who want to live in Wilson County, with its second highest median family income in the state of Tennessee and a household per capita income that ranks 168th in the United States. Wilson County’s growth rate is above the national average. “From 2000 to 2005, we had a 13.2% growth rate,” says G.C. Hixson, executive director of the JECDB of Wilson County. “That kind of growth rate is driving a lot of the new residential, retail and industrial growth.”

At the Bechwith Road Interchange, an immediate 500 acres south of the interchange will open with resi-

dential, retail and commercial possibilities. Over 2,000 acres of developable property lies north of the Bechwith Road Interchange (scheduled to open in 2007).

Implementing an economic development plan is somewhat like the chicken-or-the-egg conundrum—what comes first? “There are three components to building a vibrant community,” Hinesley says. Those are homes, shopping and employment opportunities. It’s a juggling act to have it happen in a balanced way that encourages controlled growth.”

Providence Marketplace, a project that has been 19 years in the making, is providing all three. “People are moving to the area, and they are demanding services,” Hinesley says. Providence’s 3,100 homes needed the Marketplace, but the Marketplace needed the homes, too. And facilities that will provide employment are on the way, as well. Tennessee Sports Medicine is about to build an additional office and medical complex.

“When Target heard that 3,100 homes were going into an area that had been 1,000 acres of nothing, just fresh clay—and that the median family income of Wilson County was \$69,000 yearly, they decided to take the gamble,” Hinesley says. “We had a terribly underserved consumer market here—no way to buy home improvement items, fabric, men’s shoes, a dining room table or a TV. Until 2000, you couldn’t buy liquor-by-the-drink in the city of Mt. Juliet, so none of the nicer restaurants that serve alcohol would take a chance on us. Now we can offer shopping, fine dining, places to work and homes to live in—right in beautiful





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From left: Lebanon: Jeff Porter; Mt. Juliet: Alex Dowdy and Steven Fird

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Wilson County, ten minutes from Nashville International Airport and fifteen minutes from downtown Nashville.”

“All indications are that the central location and other factors we’ve been building on are making Wilson County a good place to do business,” Hixson says. “We have new industries coming into the area, and there is growth happening with existing businesses, too.”

In the industrial arena, TACLE Seating USA, a Nissan supplier of automotive seating, will be up and running by year-end in a new \$17 million building. TACLE Seating will bring 170 new jobs into the county. Kenwal Steel Corp., out of Dearborn, Mich., announced in recent weeks that the company will build a \$12 million, 110,000-square-foot service center in the county, processing a full range of flat-rolled steel products and offering 70 new manufacturing jobs, and Wilson Sporting Goods has taken 575,000 square feet of distribution space.

Bridgestone/Firestone added another 450,000 square feet to their distribution facilities, in addition to the one million square feet they occupied, and MEDIAMail, a fulfillment and logistics company, is undergoing a 40,000-square-foot expansion in its facilities.

“We are continuing to bring in more industries and expand on the existing companies already in Wilson County,” Hixson says. “We are unique in Tennessee’s manufacturing base because we have had no slow-down—we continue to maintain our industrial base and to grow, which is an indication of the diversification of the county. We have a vibrant industrial and logistics base in Wilson County.”

Dianne Fletcher, assistant director of the JECDB, emphasizes that Wilson County is a good place to do business. “We’ve had some new development recently in industrial parks,” she says. “Duke Properties purchased 224 acres at Park 840, and they’ve also constructed a 650,000-square-foot spec building. Nashville East Logistics Center has developers coming into the county and building, too.”

In addition to the Prime Outlets



The Music City Star



Nashville Superspeedway

the first Ann Taylor factory outlet in the state.

With the influx of restaurants and shopping venues, new hotels are seizing on the opportunity to offer hospitality in Wilson County, including Hampton Inn and Holiday Inn Express. “There is a lot of activity in our county with the Nashville Superspeedway, which hosts NASCAR and Indy Racing League races; with ball teams coming into the area for tournaments; plus the auto auction,” Fletcher says. “Hotels encounter less operating costs in Wilson County, and now there are restaurants to support the hotels. You can stay, eat, shop and be entertained, right in Wilson County, with easy access to downtown Nashville.”

“One growth component that is a strong part of our vision is the office and service industry,” Hixson says. “We’re concentrating on that. We plan to diversify even more into regional office complexes, and with development property coming online in just a few short years, we can do that. We plan to be a player in that field. We want people to live and work in the county.”

Hinesley agrees. “Employers, when looking at a new area, ask, ‘Where are the available workers?’ And people migrate toward jobs. In Wilson County, we have a good public school system, available land for housing, new and vibrant retail opportunities and entertainment. Now we’re working on the employment aspect of the equation.”

Both Hinesley and Hixson concur



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SOURCE: Joint Economic & Community Development Board

that it is a tightrope act to balance the employment, housing and retail needs of the community, and that Wilson County is primed to walk that tightrope. "As commute times—and the cost of commuting—continue to increase, people will want to work closer to home," Hinesley says. "Our challenge is to get everyone pulling the wagon in the same direction—and that is happening all around the county."

At the Southstar/Lebanon Marketplace, property has changed hands and permits have been issued for different projects. Lebanon Windwood Professional Plaza has 28,000 square feet of office space fully leased. Mt. Juliet Crossing recently announced the development of a 72,000-square-foot office complex. Two Rivers Ford and Carl Black Chevrolet, major players in the Nashville automotive sales

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market, are expanding into Wilson County.

“Growth is going to happen,” Hinesley says. “And we should be celebrating how people are flocking to our area. It’s a daunting task to meet and face the challenges of explosive growth, and our success hinges on how effective we are at making everyone feel that they are a part of the process.”

Even with all the growth and the influx of upscale homes and shopping, Wilson County still maintains a rural quality with active antique sales, the mile-long yard sale in the spring and fall in Watertown, the Jazz Festival (also in Watertown) and, yes, the Wilson County Fair. This year, over 419,000 people attended the Fair, up from last year and previous years.

The Music City Star commuter train began operations on September 18, offering commuters a railroad line between Wilson County and Nashville. “Developers will look at



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retail responsibilities around the stops on that line," Fletcher says. "We should see new residential growth not far from those stations."

Hixson agrees. "The train will be unique in Middle Tennessee and offer an alternative for Wilson County residents who commute to Nashville for work or for travel to downtown events," he says. "The Music City Star will be an exciting asset to the community."

According to Hixson, Wilson County isn't about to fix what isn't broken. "We plan to keep doing the great things we're doing," he says, "and that is growing the tax base and creating new opportunities for the people in our county."

Vanatta agrees that it is quality of life that is the selling point for Wilson County. "We offer something for all ages," she says. "Come check us out in Wilson County," she says. "You won't want to leave."

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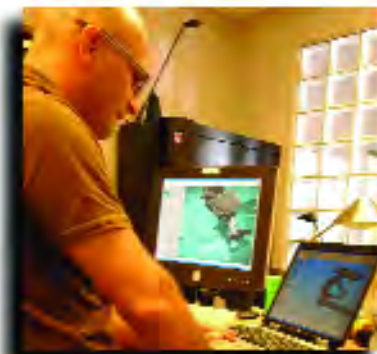
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