



Transitions are bridges from the past to the future. They move us from the old to the new. Every year, we transition to a new year with new goals and new horizons to be reached. Here in Brunswick County, we have been transitioning from a once-sleepy beach community into a vibrant and diverse community filled with opportunity. As part of the Wilmington MSA that borders the Myrtle Beach MSA, Brunswick County has been one of the fastest-growing populations in the nation for the past decade. This growth has created cultural and commercial changes for the betterment of our citizens and opportunities for new businesses to locate and thrive.

Here at Brunswick BID, we are focused on growing the burgeoning manufacturing sector, which has long had established companies such as Duke Progress Energy, Archer Daniels Midland, and new companies such as Cygnus and Pacon Manufacturing. As any economist or economic developer will tell you, having a balanced economy is key to the long-term economic health of a community. Our County Commissioners understand this and have done the hard work and heavy lifting it takes to invest in the appropriate infrastructure needed to sustain the type of growth we have experienced in the last few years.

In addition to public investments, we are fortunate to have private sector investment as well. Companies such as Samet Corporation, Windsor Commercial, and Cameron Management have invested in speculative industrial buildings that are ready-made for both light and heavy industrial operations. Additionally, we have two 1,000-acre megasites that are both public-private partnerships. The International Commerce Center Building at the International Logistics Park was recently expanded, accommodating the continued growth of Tri-Tech Forensics and creating space for additional tenants.

Across the future Interstate 74, the Mid-Atlantic Industrial Rail Park, one of the state of North Carolina's designated megasites, recently saw the location of Epsilon Advanced Materials. EAM is an India-based producer of graphite for the battery industry. More development around this approximately \$1 billion project is expected in the coming years as suppliers, vendors, and like-sector companies seek to capitalize on Epsilon's production facility, currently slated to begin operations in the first quarter 2027.

So, what's the reason for all this growth? What makes us so attractive? The answers are quite simple. We have utilities infrastructure, available land, and logistics and port infrastructure to accommodate large manufacturers. We have the fifth-lowest property tax rate out of 100 North Carolina counties. We have a growing workforce. Next door, the city of Wilmington boasts the urban amenities of restaurants, shopping, and other cultural opportunities. Not to mention our beaches and outdoor recreation opportunities are second to none.

If you're looking to lower your business taxes and logistics costs during the week and then getting sand between your toes on the weekends, consider a move to Brunswick County. Our region is ideally positioned to help you connect to the global economy with the lifestyle that offers something for everyone. If you would like to learn more about our community, please don't hesitate to reach out for more information. We are ready to take your Bid on Brunswick!

Warm regards,

William S. (Bill) Early
Executive Director

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GOING COASTAL

People and businesses are flocking to southeastern North Carolina. Brunswick, New Hanover and Pender counties are working to ensure they have what they need to live and work.

Southeastern North Carolina is home to the state's fifth- and sixth-largest counties by area — Pender and Brunswick — and its second-smallest, New Hanover. Its 328 square miles is about the size of Charlotte, the state's most-populous city. Together they form the Wilmington Metropolitan Statistical Area. With a population nearing 500,000, it's one of the nation's fastest-growing regions.

Wilmington topped United Van Lines' 2024 National Movers Study, which found 83% of household moves there were inbound. The New Hanover County seat's population was nearly 124,000 in 2023, according to N.C. Office of State Budget and Management estimates, nearly 10,000 more than in 2020. That growth has been spurred by a blossoming job market, attractive beachfront communities and relatively

low cost of living. Some people are here for an education. "We talk a lot about the film industry, our port, our restaurant scene and so many other key economic drivers," says New Hanover County Manager Chris Coudriet. "But we are also a very big college town. Combined, [UNC Wilmington] and Cape Fear Community College have nearly 50,000 students taking part in classes. That's a tremendous amount of people in various stages of their educational journeys in our community."

Coudriet says the county has a broad makeup. "A lot of people are here for a lot of different reasons, and that's something we really embrace," he says. "Obviously, we have a thriving tourism industry driven by our proximity to water. We also have become a destination for folks later in their lives or careers who are looking to settle down."

The region attracts commerce, too. "Our location between both the Wilmington and Myrtle Beach MSAs makes it a competitive and viable area for business and industry development opportunities, as well as its vibrant beach towns and growing municipalities," says Brunswick County Manager Steve Stone. "Brunswick has a long and fascinating history dating back to before the American Revolution, and its proximity to Wilmington and the Atlantic Ocean, along with its low tax rate, has made it one of the most desirable places to live, visit or start a business."

A growing population and economy are good problems to have. But they still create challenges. Each of the three counties are meeting them by developing and enacting proactive strategies.



Sandbar Oyster Co., which recently leased a building in Leland, has put its Oyster Catcher Substrate to work on Sugarloaf Island. It's retaining sand, catching shells and supporting marsh grass growth.

Building business space

Wilmington Business Development, an economic development agency that partners with government and community leaders in New Hanover and Pender counties, lists 26 industrial, commercial and logistics properties. They include Pender Commerce Park, which has more than 1 million square feet of industrial space, \$500 million in private capital investment and more than 1,000 jobs.

Pender Commerce Park investors include Maersk, The Home Depot and Amazon, which is building a 3.2 million square foot fulfillment center, where 1,000 people are expected to work, at the 330-acre park. Other park tenants are Acme Smoked Fish, Empire Distributors, FedEx Freight, Coastal Beverages and Polyhose, which will double the size of its 52,500-square-foot factory later this year. "[The park] has been a tremendous asset to our county thriving thanks to the strong partnership with Wilmington Business Development and the industries that have established themselves there," Pender County Manager Michael Silverman says. "This success has generated significant revenue for the county, created jobs for our residents and spurred further growth and development throughout the area."

New Hanover is developing Blue Clay Business Park. "We received \$15 million in state funding for ... infrastructure off Blue Clay Road in the northeast portion of the county, which will help bring infrastructure to this 120-acre site, allowing businesses to take root in our community with the space they need," Coudriet says. "We already have multiple agreements in place for several businesses who are either looking to build or expand current operations at the Blue Clay Business Park."

New Hanover also is home to the 284-acre Port of Wilmington on the Cape Fear River, 26 miles upstream from the Atlantic Ocean and part of Foreign Trade Zone 214. Its 2024 general cargo volume was up 11% from the year prior, according to a January news release. "[The port's volumes were] primarily driven by commodities supporting U.S. infrastructure, construction and the automotive industry such as lumber, cement and steel. Volume forecasts show this trend continuing ... into early 2025," the news release said.

Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, one of the world's largest transfer points between trains, trucks and ships, imports and exports weapons and equipment for the U.S. Army in Brunswick County.

Barnes Sutton, Leland's economic and community development director, says nearby Leland Innovation Park is "poised for significant growth," with plans for new industrial, commercial and office facilities.

Leland's target industries are life sciences, information technology, medical technology, aerospace, marine biology and wind energy. "Our recruitment strategy begins with supporting existing businesses in these sectors, as most job creation comes from companies already operating here," Sutton says.

Sandbar Oyster Co., for example, leased a 2,000-square-foot building in Leland last year to manufacture and distribute its Oyster Catcher Substrate, a cloth-and-cement device that its namesake shellfish settle on and grow. "Their decision was influenced by the region's skilled workforce, bolstered by programs at UNC Wilmington, Brunswick Community College and Cape Fear Community College," Sutton says.

"These institutions produce graduates with expertise tailored to industries like marine biology, which aligns perfectly with Sandbar's growth trajectory."



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UNCW is an EEO/AA institution.



The Gullah-Geechee Tourism Alliance bring together businesses, tourism bureaus, cultural institutions and residents for discussions and planning around the topic of boosting tourism.

Brunswick plans for people

Brunswick County's population is the state's fastest growing. It increased 17% between 2020 and 2023. Leland, the county seat, had a population of 30,264 in 2023, according to the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management, more than double the 2010 count. "Situated between the city of Wilmington and the serene Brunswick County beaches, Leland provides the best of both worlds – proximity to city amenities paired with a relaxed, small-town lifestyle," Sutton says. "Our growth has been fueled primarily by thoughtfully designed planned unit developments, featuring single-family homes, multifamily residences, and a mix of commercial and industrial spaces. These developments are carefully integrated with Leland's natural environment, preserving forests, wetlands and waterways to create communities that honor the area's ecological heritage."

Several plans are in use to address Brunswick's population growth. The Board of Commissioners has identified six focuses within its strategic plan: economic development, education, excellent government, growth and sustainability, healthy and safe community, and engagement and connection.

Blueprint Brunswick 2040 Plan was adopted in February 2023. "It was a joint effort between our planning and parks and recreation departments to create a new comprehensive land use plan and a parks and recreation master plan," Stone says. "These plans will guide future growth, decisions, investments in infrastructure and services within unincorporated Brunswick County and six participating towns – Bald Head Island, Belville, Bolivia, Navassa, Northwest and Sandy Creek. The Blueprint Brunswick Plan is not a legal document, but it is a guide that staff regularly consults and reviews to help make recommendations to developers and ultimately the Planning Board when projects are brought for consideration."

The county is working with consultants on proposed updates to modernize its Unified Development Ordinance. Three community meetings were held in January to help guide growth and development in unincorporated portions of the county. The ordinance lists 14 purposes, including preserving overall quality of life, protecting the character of established residential neighborhoods, encouraging environmentally responsible development and maintaining a range of housing choices and options.

Leland recently completed a resident-driven Economic Development Strategic Plan. Long-range planning for growth was prioritized by 37% of the responses. It was followed by transportation infrastructure, which was prioritized by 17.4% of the responses. "We've taken that input and have recently added additional resident feedback for the town's 2030 strategic plan," Sutton says. Priorities include implementing a business retention and expansion program, entrepreneurial support, an economic development fund, updating the tourism plan, and beautification and public art.

Sutton says there needs to be balance between past and present. "Our area is rich in managed and natural spaces, home to diverse wildlife habitats and unique ecosystems," he says. "Many of our developing parks offer direct access to these ecological treasures, which feature rare species, important animal populations and other significant natural features. Leland is also part of the Gullah-Geechee Heritage Corridor, a deeply rooted cultural area that celebrates its history, music, food and dance. This heritage is honored annually right in the center of the downtown Gateway District, fostering a vibrant sense of community."

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New Hanover County is home to unique natural resources, including beaches and waterways. The local cultural scene is vibrant, showcasing food and the arts. It, along with expanding employment opportunities, attracts new residents.

New Hanover addresses affordable housing

Destination NHC 2050 prepares New Hanover County to meet needs such as adding affordable housing, preserving greenspace and creating high-wage job opportunities. "It's a sturdy framework but not rigid and will be able to move with our community forward with the best strategies for land use," Coudriet says. "We really want the community to be involved in building that plan, so we can understand how our residents envision the future of New Hanover County, and our planning and land use team has been working very hard to gather that information and make sure it's reflected in the plan that's being developed."

The county's Workforce Housing Services program began in 2022. It started with \$15 million to be distributed over five years, and it has proved \$9 million to date for 664 units. In October, commissioners approved its third installment of \$3 million, divided among three organizations to create 238 units. "It's not enough just to have good paying jobs, which [county commissioners] have fostered with economic incentives as well," Coudriet says. "Our commissioners also want to make sure those people can

afford to live in the community where they work, which is why this program is so important."

Last Frontier Project continues preparations for residential and commercial development. "Outside of these city limits there are a lot of areas in the county that are unincorporated and are not connected to municipal services like water and sewer," Coudriet says. "The Last Frontier Project is one of the biggest undertakings to address that, ensuring our residents have access to safe, clean drinking water and strategic development can take place with reliable infrastructure. In partnership with the Cape Fear Public Utility Authority, we've been working to fill that infrastructure gap to these underserved areas. The Last Frontier is going to be a \$39.6 million project, \$30 million of which will come from state-issued funding."

Coudriet says the county is focused on spending tax dollars in ways that benefit all residents best. "Whether that's access to greenspaces, like our parks and gardens, or connecting them to libraries in their own neighborhoods, we really want people to find the things that they enjoy and enhance their quality of life," he says.



Pender respects its roots

Pender County's population grew 12% between 2020 and 2023 to 67,464, according to N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. That was the second-largest percentage gain in the state. Its 934 square miles encompass rural neighborhoods, protected game lands, and oceanfront communities Surf City and Topsail Beach. The Moores Creek National Battlefield, which commemorates a 1776 defeat of British troops during the American Revolution, welcomed 53,700 visitors in 2023. There's plenty of farmland, too.

Pender had 354 farms covering 44,472 acres in 2022, according to the latest U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics. Its primary crop is blueberries. The annual NC Blueberry Festival in Burgaw celebrates the berries' historical, economic and cultural significance with a 5K run and walk, antique show, car show, craft and food vendors, children's activities and live music.

Imagine Pender 2050 was launched a year ago. It's in the fourth of five stages and is expected to be adopted this summer. "[It] will guide change in our community over the next 25 years, including identifying areas for new development," according to the county website.

Residents' initial feedback for the plan emphasized overcrowded schools, draining and flooding issues, regulating development in order to protect nearby property values and minimizing development of new housing while requiring new homes to be placed on lots of a half-acre or larger if possible. They also mentioned the county's need to support and fund programs to help farmers. ■

Throughout the year, Burgaw has several blueberry-themed events such as the NC Blueberry Scholarship Pageant and a pancake breakfast, which is held each February to raise funds for the NC Blueberry Festival.

PHOTO CREDIT: NEW HANOVER COUNTY AND THE CITY OF BURGAW

SUN + FUNDS

Brunswick, New Hanover and Pender Counties

offer plenty to see. There are lighthouses, historical sites and barrier island communities to explore. A lively downtown and Battleship North Carolina await in Wilmington. That's where you'll find Airlie Gardens, which travel website Orbitz named the state's best place to get married. **"Yes, we are small in terms of land mass, but there is no shortage of things to do and engage with throughout our community,"** says New Hanover County Manager Chris Coudriet. Plenty of people are doing just that.

New Hanover recorded more than \$1.1 billion in visitor spending in 2023, a 5.9% increase from the year prior, according to a study commissioned by Visit North Carolina, the state's tourism booster. The industry employed 6,790 county residents and paid a total payroll of \$2.8 million that year. **"During calendar year 2023, countywide room occupancy tax collections totaled more than \$24.9 million, an increase of 4.94% over the previous [Return on Travel] benchmark set in 2022,"** Kim Hufham, president and CEO of Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau, said in a news release. "This continued growth can be attributed to our visitor-friendly destination that embodies the best of the Carolina coast."

Brunswick visitors spent almost \$1.2 billion in 2023, the sixth most in the state and 7.5% more than the year prior, the study found. "Brunswick County also has a rich agricultural tradition and seafood industry history," says Brunswick County Manager Steve Stone. **"Our six vibrant beach towns, including two of the seven North Carolina lighthouses, and our vast coastlines have made Brunswick County a popular tourism destination."**

A Pender County study found domestic and international visitors spent **\$199.1 million in 2023**, up 5% from the year prior. About 1,000 county residents worked in the industry that year, when its payroll was \$40.4 million.

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.