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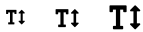
Johnston County evolves from bedroom community to economic destination

Johnston County's workforce has exploded in the past year and expected to continue its long ascent benefitting from high-tech -- and high-paying -- manufacturers, county leaders say on WRAL's "On The Record."

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On The Record: Johnston County growth leads to more traffic on roads, at airport

By Brian Shrader , WRAL News



For decades, Johnston County didn't look all that different from other parts of rural North Carolina. It relied heavily on agriculture and other industries that started to crater at the end of the 20th century.

"We really took it on the chin in the mid 90s with the loss of textiles and the offshoring that we saw," Chris Johnson, the director of the Johnston County Economic Development Office, told WRAL's "On The Record" program, which aired Saturday. "... And then when you add into the fact of the loss of the tobacco industry."



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Despite the decline of textiles and tobacco, Johnston has steadily grown over the past three decades, benefitting from the growth of the Triangle's core counties and a concerted effort to lure biotechnology and pharmaceutical manufacturers — companies that aren't just high-tech, but also high-paying.

Today, Johnston County is no longer a bedroom community. It's a destination unto itself.

Over the past year, its workforce has exploded — beyond the county's normal growth. At the end of January, there were a record 124,000 employed people in the county — up about 15% from a year earlier, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's the biggest year-over-year jump since at least 1990. The average annual growth in workers since then has been about 3%.

In recent months, companies have announced several expansions that promise to bring more than 1,500 jobs to the county in coming years — most of them offering pay that eclipses the county average. And it's just a small portion of the jobs expected.



State approves incentives for 500-job window factory in Johnston County

In May, Crystal Window & Door Systems said it planned to build a new factory and create about 500 jobs in Selma as part of an \$83.65 million investment. Crystal Window is expected to pay an average annual salary of about \$56,000 — about 11% above the Johnston County average at the time the project was announced. The project is projected to grow the state's economy by \$1.09 billion. The company would build its facility at the Eastfield Crossing development, east of the intersection of Interstate 95 and U.S. 70, according to the county.

In September, state and local officials approved \$4.1 million in incentives to attract a food processing company that is planning a \$35.7-million expansion in Selma — a move expected to bring 200 jobs to the Johnston County town. Veetee Foods, which specializes in making nonperishable foods that can be stored at room temperature, plans to pay an average of about \$58,400, commerce officials said. That's about 7% more than the current county average.

Officials approve \$4.1 million in incentives for food company that plans Selma expansion

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But the biggest announcement came in June, when Novo Nordisk said it was planning a \$4.1 billion expansion that is expected to create 1,000 new, high-paying jobs in the county — the biggest life-sciences investment in state history, according to economic developers. The Danish drugmaker, which has long manufactured and packaged treatments for diabetes and obesity at facilities in Johnston and Durham counties, has been ramping up global production to meet surging demand for diabetes and weight-loss treatments such as Ozempic and Wegovy. The new jobs are expected to pay an average of \$69,000 per year — 29% above the county average.

Novo's expansion comes eight years after it committed \$1.8 billion to build another facility — focused on active pharmaceutical ingredients — in the county. The company, already one of the biggest private employers in Johnston County, currently employs 2,500 people in the state.



Novo Nordisk announces record \$4.1B, 1,000-job expansion in Johnston County

Biotech magnet

Advanced manufacturers have been attracted to Johnston County because of its proximity to a strong pool of workers and its proximity to north-south and east-west interstates — interstates 40 and 95 — which make it easy for companies to quickly get products to customers up and down the East Coast. Johnson frequently points out that the county is within a day's drive of New York and Florida. Another major corridor — Interstate 42 — is also being developed, and a new section of N.C. 540 will make the county more accessible to other parts of the Triangle region. "It's the lifeblood of our future," Johnson said.

The county has also invested significantly in community colleges and workforce training programs, which have played a key role in preparing workers for growing companies in the county. In 2022, the Johnston County Board of Commissioners approved funding for a 60,000-square-foot advanced manufacturing



younger generations for the local jobforce, working biotech themes into high school curricula.

The county has also benefited from residual growth of neighboring counties. And it's not by happenstance. Johnston County is part of what economic developers call the BioPharma Crescent, a five-county region in Eastern North Carolina that is home to a large cluster of biotech and pharmaceutical manufacturers. Over the past 30 years, the county has worked to boost infrastructure and offer workforce programs to compete for advanced manufacturing jobs such as the ones at Novo Nordisk.

The strategy is giving Johnston County residents more opportunities to work closer to home; more than half Johnston's workforce travels outside the county for employment, Johnson has said. "My role is to turn those cars around," he said.

"There was a time — when I graduated from high school many many years ago — when the opportunities did not exist in Johnson County if you didn't go into agriculture careers," Commissioner Dickie Braswell said at a meeting in June at which county officials approved an incentives package for Novo Nordisk's latest expansion. "You had to pretty much leave the county. And now we've got good-paying jobs, and people who graduate from our schools can choose where they want to work. They've got opportunities. And I just think it's great to be a part of that."

Airport growth

An indicator of any region's economic health is its airport, and Johnston Regional Airport has tripled its activity in the last five years.

Single-runway airports such as Johnston Regional can support 200,000 operations per year, David Harris, the airport's director, told "On the Record." Those operations include takeoffs, landings and flyovers. Johnston is forecast to support 120,000 operations this year, up from 40,000 just four years ago.

"I-95 exists in the sky as well and Johnston Regional sits directly underneath of it," Harris said.



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Johnston Regional is now the fourth-busiest airport in North Carolina, behind the main airports in Raleigh, Charlotte and Greensboro. The Federal Aviation Administration says Johnston's airport will need to build a control tower to accommodate its increasing air traffic.

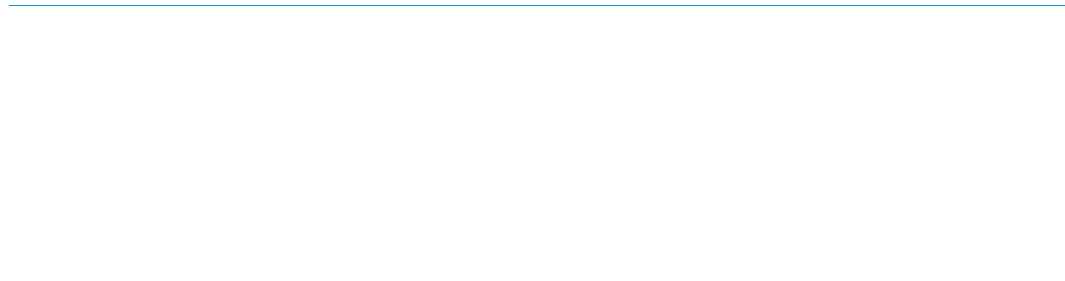
Johnston's airport is known as a reliever airport for Raleigh-Durham International. Harris said corporations enjoy sending their jets straight to Johnston's airport because it's often easier than going to RDU.

"The FAA plan is to move as [many] of the smaller the business jets, the flight training and the private owners away from RDU, where they're free to aviate the way they desire and to build the economies in those areas," Harris said.

Growing pains

As manufacturers and other employers look to build in Johnston County, they're also competing with residential developers. That can be problematic, Johnson said, because economic development often benefits from the availability of land. Competition over land has caused development costs to increase, a situation that also increases the cost of new residential construction.

The county's growing population — which hit a record 250,000 in 2024 — is looking at more expensive homes, too. The county's residential price index also hit a record high in 2024.



"That's a little concerning," Johnson said. On the one hand, the county has thrived on its affordability compared to Wake County. But rising land prices could also get in the way of corporate recruitment.

Residential growth is also a concern for the airport, which is working with economic developers and planners to ensure it doesn't become too much of a nuisance to new homes. "We want to grow the airport, which is now kind of at odds with that growth in housing," Harris said.

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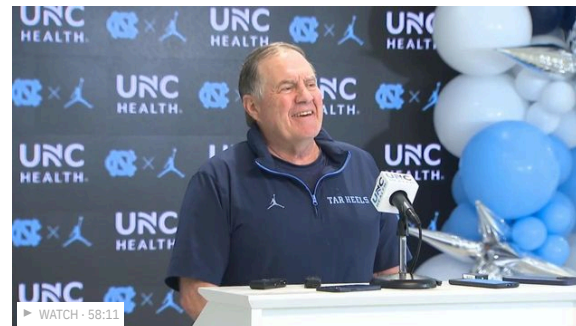
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