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*Man and Mother Nature meet along North Carolina's 301-mile coast. Communities here are responding to environmental changes such as more powerful storms and rising sea levels to protect their economies.*

# Shifting sands

*Coastal communities are working to shelter their busy economies from a changing environment.*

**D**ylan McNamara, a UNC Wilmington associate professor since 2008 and chairman of its physics and physical oceanography department, has always loved watching the ocean. But he will see it differently now that the National Science Foundation awarded his team a four-year \$1.5 million grant in September. It'll fund a study that examines the interplay of the economy and public policies in a changing environment of rising sea levels and more frequent and powerful storms. It hopes to predict how people will react to climatic changes along the coastline.

McNamara, along with scientists and economists from Duke University, UNC Chapel Hill, East Carolina University and three out-of-state universities, will use computer modeling to analyze the relationships between man and Mother Nature. "We are heading into a critical phase where coastal communities will have to make important decisions about how they are going to adapt to the future. We are hoping we can inform some of that policy. Our goal is to understand the complex dynamics at play along human-occupied coastlines. Some of the work we've done leading up to the grant shows that people's perceptions of the amount

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PORT OF PROGRESS



## Cape Fear region has what businesses want

North Carolina's Cape Fear region — Brunswick, Columbus, New Hanover and Pender counties — provides the infrastructure and resources needed to start, expand or relocate a business. While it's already home to large companies, first-time entrepreneurs, precision manufacturers and high-tech masterminds, it continues to invest in the success of businesses from a variety of industries.

Wilmington Chamber of Commerce and regional economic-development partners established a multifaceted campaign — Choose Cape Fear — to generate long-term business interest, investment and impact in the region. The campaign touts the region's expansive business infrastructure to attract and spur economic development.

The Cape Fear Region offers businesses all the benefits of locating in North Carolina. The state was named No. 2 Best State for Business by *Forbes* in 2016. And North Carolina's corporate tax rate was reduced to 3% in January, making it the nation's lowest.

The region is well connected. Recently enlarged Port of Wilmington is strategically located on the East Coast. It's within 700 miles of more than 70% of the country's industrial base. Wilmington International Airport offers nonstop flights via Fort Worth-based American Airlines Inc. and Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines Inc. to Charlotte, Atlanta, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., where connecting flights take passengers around the globe.

The region's labor pool includes more than 200,000 skilled workers, 30% of whom have at least a four-year college degree. And there are plenty more ready to jump in. In addition to the 14,000 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate students at UNC Wilmington, more than 37,000 students are enrolled at the region's three community colleges — Southeastern in Whiteville, Brunswick in Bolivia and Cape Fear in Wilmington — which also offer free customized training to businesses.

More people are choosing to live in the Cape Fear Region, where they find a mix of quiet coastline and resource-rich cities. They're making it one of the fastest growing places in the Southeast. The population of Leland in Brunswick County, for example, was 17,956 in 2016, according to the Office of State Budget and Management. That's almost 33% more than in 2010.

of risk they're facing plays a significant role, so we need a better representation of the evolution of these communities going forward. Property values will change if people see risks increasing. The insurance markets will change, as well as the affordability of the engineering that's done. And this is what we're hoping to explore."

McNamara's not sure how his study's findings will shape life along the coast. "I don't have an answer to how people are going to respond regarding investment and infrastructure and how people utilize the coastline as an economic market. We'll be doing our best to put that information in front of the towns we're studying." Whichever course they choose, these communities have plenty to protect.

North Carolina's 301-mile coast is home to a diverse economy driven by logistics, defense, manufacturing, health care and tourism industries. Dare County's Economic Development and Diversification Strategic Plan, for example, estimates College of The Albemarle's boat building and workforce training programs are linked to more than \$100 million in revenue. Commercial fishing makes a \$25 million annual economic impact. But the biggest splash is made by tourists who flock to the sand and surf.

The N.C. Department of Commerce says tourists spent about \$1.1 billion and supported more than 13,000 jobs in Dare County in 2016. Many come to see three of the state's most popular attractions: Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Wright Brothers National Memorial and Fort Raleigh National Historic Site. "We've got a good and vibrant economy here, and we've got elected officials who try to preserve it," says Dare County Manager and Attorney Robert Outten. "People have choices, and we have to give them a reason to choose the Outer Banks. Tools have been available to protect the shoreline such as beach nourishment. We've been putting sand on the beaches and putting money aside for future loss. In five, seven, 10 years, we're going to have to put more sand to keep our economy going."

Carteret County's southern barrier islands — The Crystal Coast — include the



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Wilmington River District

communities of Emerald Isle and Atlantic Beach. Its northern islands make up 56-mile Cape Lookout National Seashore, which is only accessible by boat and home to wild horses. “We already have about 2 million come through every year as day visitors, and people passing through to the ferry or coming from Ocracoke [Island],” says Carol Lohr, Crystal Coast Tourism Authority’s executive director. “But parts of Carteret County really are serene. Even in the busiest part of our season, we still have areas such as Cape Lookout National Seashore, and it’s just as peaceful as it ever was. So there are places you can go and take it all in.”

Tourism is Carteret’s biggest industry. Visitors spent \$351.2 million here in 2016 — 4.2% more than the year prior — which supported almost 3,500 jobs. “It has taken folks a while to embrace the tourism industry,” Lohr says. “The residents embrace what it does here, because it lowers their taxes and what they have to pay, so that’s a positive thing. And it’s nice to share what’s in your backyard.”

Visitors to Onslow County, home to the Marine Corps’ Camp Lejeune and Air Station New River, spent \$222 million in 2016. “Being a coastal county, we receive a lot of visitors to our beach in North Topsail Beach and others who choose to stay in the coastal town of Swansboro and enjoy Emerald Isle,” says Kristen Oflin, Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce’s tourism manager. “We also see a lot of business travelers directly related to the military.”

Sheila Pierce Knight, Jacksonville Onslow Economic Development Inc’s executive director, says natural assets shape life in the county. “North Carolina is kind of unique in that we’re very protective of our beaches and keeping the national parks settings and keeping development to limited heights. And we protect the property rights of residents to have access to the beaches. From an economic-development standpoint, I think you’ll find the coastal communities try to collaborate with economic projects and certainly with tourism. In this location, you’re a very easy drive to shopping and cultural events, and you can get back home and not be in an intense traffic environment.”



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*Most coastal communities, including Duck, invest in beach nourishment programs, which replace sand washed away by storms and support their largest industry, tourism.*

Knight says there also are plenty of business opportunities. Burton Business Park near Albert Ellis Airport completed a 30,000-square-foot shell building in September, and she says Jacksonville Business Park and Camp Davis Industrial Park have sites available. “We’re very busy right now and have seen an increase in project activity in the last eight to 10 months. The economy is making more people optimistic. And we’re continuing to be blessed by the very significant economic engine that is the U.S. Marine Corps. That gives us a lot of stability in what would be down time. We have a lot more industry than some people realize.”

On the Cape Fear River, 26 miles from open sea, stands the growing Port of Wilmington. Its 1,200-foot turning basin was enlarged by 200 feet in July, when it also purchased three large container cranes. Two of them will arrive in the spring; the third will be delivered by January 2019. The moves were made to welcome larger container ships, which are steaming in from



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the south. “The expanded Panama Canal, which opened last June, allows for larger vessels to pass through the canal, therefore paving the way for larger vessels to call on East Coast ports,” says N.C. Ports Communications Manager Bethany Welch. “We are big-ship ready today, accommodating the largest ships consistently calling on East Coast ports.”

Also in July, the port and Jacksonville, Fla.-based CSX Corp. launched the Queen City Express, which provides direct rail service to Charlotte from the port. That gives companies farther inland easy access to raw materials and markets for their finished goods. Products shipped from Wilmington include grains, forest products, chemicals, fertilizer, wood pulp, furniture, automotive parts and apparel. It and Port of Morehead City support more than 76,000 jobs and help generate \$707 million in annual state and local tax revenue.

Wilmington’s Cape Fear riverfront is undergoing its own transformation. A river

walk, new park and an events venue — The Shell — at the 204-slip Port City Marina are bolstering the Convention District, home to 107,000-square-foot Wilmington Convention Center. Five hotels are either being built or renovated in the city, and one opened in nearby Carolina Beach in 2016. “It’s destination appeal,” says Kim Hufham, president and CEO of Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We have the wonderful River District, historic area, the Wilson Center [performing arts venue] and of course our beaches. We have 50 or so attractions and tours that are open year-round, which gives us an advantage over destinations that may be seasonal.”

New Hanover County tourists supported 6,150 jobs and spent \$553.6 million in 2016. To help them get around — and catch the eye of future visitors — the CVB recently debuted SkyNav 3-D tours on its website. Its 13 aerial and 14 ground cameras provide 360-degree views of the city, Kure Beach, Carolina Beach and Wrightsville

Beach. “We’re really fortunate to have one location with four distinct destinations,” says Connie Nelson, the CVB’s communications and public relations director. “We’re really fortunate with our geography.”

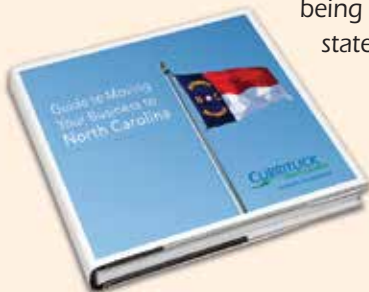
New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington completed an 18-month expansion and renovation to its Zimmer Cancer Center in September. It added onsite physician offices and expanded space for specialty practices and more than tripled the number of infusion chairs. “We used patient, staff and physician input to create an environment that is supportive and healing and brings together a larger team of experts to deliver the best care possible,” says NHRMC spokeswoman Claire Parker. “That means cancer patients have greater access to care and essential needs such as financial, social and nutritional resources all in one place.”

Across the Cape Fear River in Brunswick County there are three industrial parks — Leland Industrial Park, International

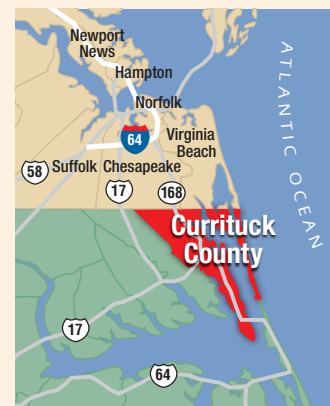
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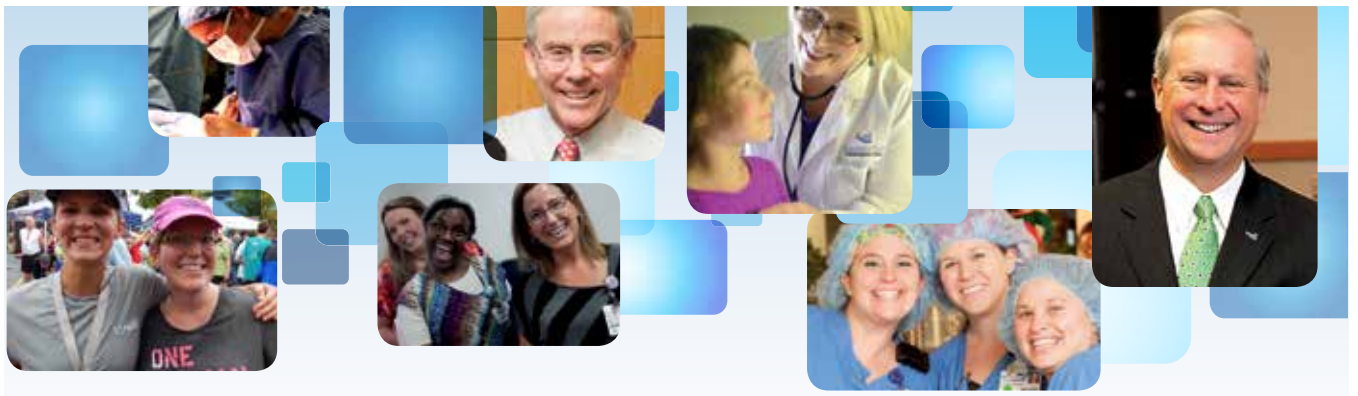
PROVIDED BY THE CARTERET COUNTY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

*Carteret County sees more than 2 million day visitors each year. Many are attracted to the tranquility of Cape Lookout National Seashore, which is only accessible by boat.*

Logistics Park and Mid-Atlantic Industrial Rail Park — and five barrier islands, where visitors stay in oceanfront vacation homes. The county counted \$544 million in tourism spending in 2016, up from \$470 million in 2013.

The coastline’s fragility was exemplified last spring, when the Brunswick County town of Oak Island brought in truckloads of sand to rebuild dunes that were washed away by Hurricane Matthew the previous fall. Brunswick is one of 20 counties monitored by Coastal Area Management Act, a cooperative agreement between state and local officials that has protected, preserved and overseen development along the coast since it was enacted in 1975.

Dare County is under the act, too, and its towns, including Duck, are proactive about protection. “Duck is a residential town with small businesses, and we are not going to be subject to a billion-dollar drainage problem like in a New Orleans



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or Norfolk,” says Town Manager Chris Layton. “We have to look at it in terms of being adaptable and seeing changes as we’re able to identify them. As the changes occur, we adjust by looking at building codes and stormwater initiatives, but we really have to adopt an adaptability model. We’ve had four or five residents over the years, prior to the nourishment project, lift their house, piece by piece like a Jenga set, and move it. You can move back 50 to 100 feet if you have a deep lot.

We’ve had homeowners pay \$200,000 to \$300,000 to do that.”

Duck initiated a \$15 million maintenance strategy in 2013. It’s funded by property owners and the county’s occupancy tax. Part of the action included slowing erosion by planting beach grass and sea oats.

This year, after construction of a larger berm, aerial footage showed a revived band of sand in Duck with minimal consequence from Hurricane Jose in September. “The increasing pressure from rising sea levels is

the backdrop that is leading to significant changes that will occur in the coastal areas decades from now,” says UNC Wilmington’s McNamara. “We can’t specify exactly, but over the next century it will be significant enough to allow these coastal communities to change in some way. So we’ll try to figure out when that will occur, so we can help with making the change more gradual.” ■

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer who lives in eastern North Carolina.



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