



*In Elizabeth City, defense contractor and communication systems manufacturer Telephonics bought a 30,000-square-foot building that will add 75 jobs. CEO Kevin McSweeney and Gov. Roy Cooper celebrated the expansion.*

## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

# SMALL-TOWN SUCCESS

Cities in the eastern part of the state are seeing a rejuvenation with new businesses opening and established businesses expanding.

Small towns across the state with historic main streets are flourishing as entrepreneurs open doors to new businesses and manufacturers expand their operations.

Local governments work to keep the camaraderie of close-knit communities, all while helping

grow industries and welcoming visitors.

These are a few elements you find in the eastern North Carolina communities of Elizabeth City, Greenville, Tarboro and Washington, where financial incentives, availability of a stable workforce and the proximity to major highways attract expanding businesses.

Two of the cities are part of the Main Street America program, a nationwide network of 1,200 cities that receive assistance with economic development and historic

preservation. Industry expansions in the cities prove companies are enjoying the location, building up the local workforce and fostering optimism.

Each city explored in this section has faced its own challenges, whether it's a decreasing population, key industries downsizing over the last few decades or fighting small-town stereotypes. Each has a story to share about what makes it tick, be successful and hopeful for the future, and why people are proud to call these places home. ■



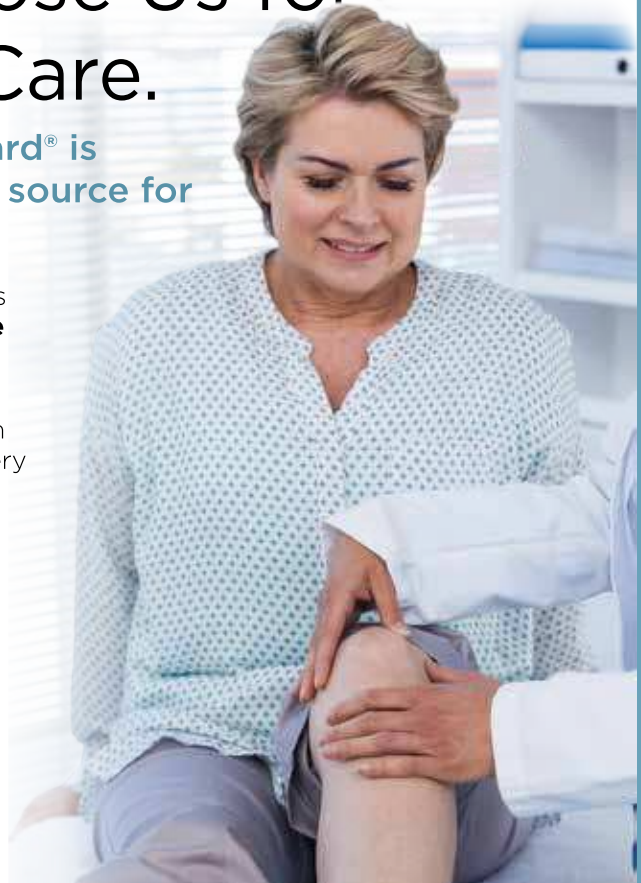
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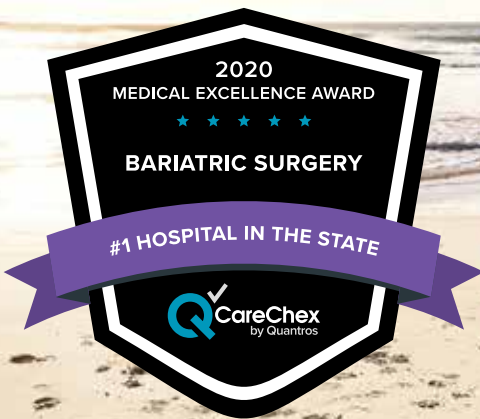
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# EASTERN CITIES GROWING

Businesses are bolstering Elizabeth City and Greenville's workforces through major expansions.



*Thermo Fisher Scientific, one of Greenville's largest employers, will be expanding its laboratory offerings and increasing manufacturing.*

Big businesses are investing big money to strengthen ties with two eastern North Carolina cities by expanding facilities, increasing production and welcoming a local workforce.

Elizabeth City, a historic city located near the Virginia line, is benefitting from interstate highway construction and proximity to the Port of Virginia. Two manufacturing companies, Hockmeyer Equipment and Telephonics, have announced multimillion-dollar facility additions that will bring at least 165 jobs to Pasquotank County.

Ninety miles southwest in Green-

ville, Thermo Fisher Scientific, the city's fourth-largest employer, is using a \$74 million investment to bring additional laboratory assets and manufacturing to Pitt County.

Elizabeth City is home to about 17,000, including the 1,700 students who attend Elizabeth City State University. One of the city's top employers is the U.S. Coast Guard. Other big employers are Pasquotank County schools and Sentara Albemarle Medical Center.

Greenville is a significantly larger city, with a population of 92,000 residents, which has doubled over the last 30 years. East Carolina University calls Greenville home, attracting more than 28,000 students to the area and boasting the largest medical school in the eastern part of the state.

Each business looking to expand in

these two cities is bolstered by location and homegrown commitments through financial help or workforce development.

"This area is exploding in growth," says Christian Lockamy, economic development director for Elizabeth City-Pasquotank County Economic Development Commission since October 2018. "It's one of the best corridors in our state that hasn't been developed."

In Greenville, Thermo Fisher is boosting production and using its pipeline for employment. The New York-based company bought Durham-based Patheon for \$7.2 billion in 2017. Patheon had operated the site since 2014.

"We will continue to drive talent acquisition and attract top talent to our facility. We stay committed to



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## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

leveraging talent in Greenville, Pitt County and the surrounding area,” says Michelle Logan, vice president and general manager of the Greenville site. “An investment in enhanced capabilities brings a commitment to build our workforce to strengthen our collaborative culture, deliver superior customer service and support local communities through growing career opportunities.”

The plant’s prefilled syringe and vial section of the business is part of its upgrade, with a focus on automated visual inspections, a virtual- and augmented-reality training center, model labs and continuous manufacturing. These moves will help improve the work by the scientific instrumentation and software company.

“With these investments, we will be better equipped to meet the needs of our customers, continue to strengthen our talented team of colleagues and ultimately serve the patients who rely on these life-saving therapies,” Logan says.

The two Elizabeth City companies are a step toward encouraging other industries to move to the town known as the “Harbor of Hospitality.”

According to Lockamy, two things happened about three years ago that motivated more business investment in the area. First was the announcement of Interstate 87, a new, 213-mile interstate that will connect Norfolk, Va., and Raleigh. The second was the decision by the Port of Virginia, the largest deep-water port on the East Coast, to include it in its Foreign Trade Zone boundary, Lockamy says. “So companies are looking for places in this area with good industrial land that have good strategic advantages.”

Hockmeyer Equipment, which manufactures equipment for pharmaceutical, agricultural and other industries, announced a \$6.1 million investment in August to grow its Elizabeth City facility and add 90 full-time employees.

Telephonics, a defense contractor that makes radar and communication systems for the military and

aviation industry, purchased a 30,000-square-foot building 13 miles from the Virginia line. The company’s previous site at the Elizabeth City Regional Airport had six employees. The new location will have 75 new jobs, Lockamy says.

“We were able to secure state funds and incentives for both those companies, which is always part of the process, to help bring those dollars local,” he says. “But when Telephonics announced they’d accepted the incentives, Hockmeyer decided to expand without state dollars. If they’d expand with state dollars, we would do reports on a regular basis, and there would be a pay-as-you-go, but at the end of the day, if they launch the expansion on their own, they can do it at their own pace.”

Hockmeyer was tentatively awarded two state grants, including a \$500,000 Rural Center Building Reuse Grant. Another state grant would have provided \$300,000, with an additional \$100,000 from the city. Working on its own terms, Lockamy says, Hockmeyer will expand into additional company-owned land within its location across from Elizabeth City State University.

Meanwhile, a \$250,000 One North Carolina Fund grant was announced for Telephonics in August. Salaries for the new jobs will reportedly be in the \$64,000 range, and the company has held job fairs since announcing its expansion.

“It’s been pretty solid. I can tell you we have a lot of activity in our marketplace right now,” Lockamy says.

“We found out that us being a border community in a border state, there are a lot of considerations available. Think about Charlotte and Rock Hill and the businesses that are meant for the Charlotte metro [area]. It’s the same in northeastern North Carolina. Our labor shed has a boundary that extends into North Carolina from southeastern Virginia, about an hour away, and encompasses Newport News and the Chesapeake

area, and we have that workforce and a lower cost of living.”

Both cities rely on partnerships with local schools to achieve their hiring goals.

Thermo Fisher works with Pitt Community College’s Pharmaceutical Services Network training, its STEM program, and the North Carolina State University Biotechnology Center in Raleigh. Pitt Community College’s campus involvement includes outreach to Greenville middle schools for STEM and Effective and Authentic Science Events — also known as EASE — activities.

“The Greenville manufacturing site is the company’s largest development and commercial manufacturing facility, employing more than 1,500 people,” Logan says. “[STEM] is critical in supporting our long-term growth within the community. Our partnerships in the region range from STEM outreach to local schools to a Pharma K-12 initiative. The Pharma K-12 Workforce Development Training Initiative recently invited high school graduates to receive pharmaceutical training and certification at our site, which resulted in the hiring of some of these graduates into our organization.”

Elizabeth City also has school connections. “College of The Albemarle produces a lot of the technical skills, and we’re working with the school system to set up an apprentice program for the coming year in the junior highs and high schools where they can receive the training they need so they can stay home and go to work,” Lockamy says.

He says Pasquotank County’s growth prospects are excellent.

“All those industries that are manufacturers, they have a strong wealth multiplier component,” he says. “If we put those eggs in that basket, it will grow the community. This is cornerstone economic development. The manufacturing base is like the foundation, and the people are the steps.” ■



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# YOU MIGHT JUST STAY AWHILE

Local officials are confident expanding manufacturing jobs and a changing downtown area will better expose Tarboro to newcomers.



*Tarboro's population has seen a slight but steady decline over the past decade, but officials believe that expanding businesses, a new five-year plan and fun events such as live music concerts during the summer will be a turning point.*

The town of Tarboro has two slogans, each with a message about the city's metamorphosis into an energetic settlement for families, visitors, new industry and private business.

"Our History Is Just the Beginning," the greeting on the town website, alludes to Tarboro's first inhabitants in 1733, its visit from George Washington in 1791, the role it held as a Civil War river port and its recognition by the National Park Service in 1977, when its historic district landed on the National Register of Historic Places.

But Tarboro, on the banks of the Tar River and 95 miles from the Atlantic, has had its struggles.

Hurricane Floyd flooded the region and washed out roads in 1999, and Hurricane Matthew reciprocated in 2016 with rising tides pushing in from the Pamlico Sound. Census data shows Tarboro's population dropped by about 500 from 2010 to 2018, leaving the Edgecombe County seat with 10,844 residents. Initiatives seem vital.

"Our history since the 1760s is really important, and we have some phenomenal architecture and things that have been really interesting for us in the past, and we're expanding from that," says Catherine Grimm, Tarboro's planning director. "You have to give a lot of credit to businesses that have been long-standing in the area. They've stuck with it through hard economic times, they're in for the long run, and the town is appreciative of what they've

sacrificed personally to keep going. And that's been an inspiration to new businesses trying to open up."

The second slogan, "You Might Just Stay Awhile," ushers in new optimism — an engaging interest in downtown, the promise of new jobs, and a perpetual calendar of concerts, parades and celebrations.

Last May, the N.C. Department of Commerce Rural Economic Development Division, with the North Carolina Main Street & Rural Planning Center, assisted Tarboro in devising a five-year economic-development strategic plan through 2023. Residents, business owners, town staff members, commissioners and others joined voices to look at the city's weaknesses, strengths, goals and opportunities.

Tarboro native Tina Parker, former director of Edgecombe Community College's Small Business Center, was hired by Tarboro in 2018 as the commercial development and Main Street coordinator to fulfill the city's obligations as part of the Main Street America program, which encourages economic development. Sept. 15 will mark the city's 40th year with the program, and a downtown celebration is planned.

"One of the things we pride ourselves on is, this is a place where you can connect with people," Parker says. "If you visit here and you're not from a small community, you find that we're a know-your-neighbor kind of community. We're very excited with the town overall and the things that are happening beyond the city limits."

Outside town borders, Chinese firm Triangle Tyre plans to open the

first phase of its tire-manufacturing plant this year on 400 acres of the 1,449-acre Kingsboro CSX Select Megasite between Rocky Mount and Tarboro. A second phase will open in 2022. The plant is expected to eventually create about 800 jobs, and a government report estimates it will contribute \$2.4 billion to the state economy in the next 12 years.

Corning, which specializes in glass, ceramics and advanced optics for industry and scientific uses, is building an \$86 million distribution center adjacent to the Kingsboro site, creating 111 jobs.

Sara Lee Frozen Bakery, the county's second-largest employer behind Edgecombe County public schools, underwent an \$18.9 million expansion and is creating 108 jobs, according to Tarboro records. The town also recently built a shell building in its industrial park in town, a prime site for a potential manufacturer or industrial tenant.

Officials see these expansions as a way for current and potential residents to have good job security.

"Our border is near Rocky Mount, but our population is much smaller," Parker says. Rocky Mount has about 54,000 residents. "As they grow, we grow, but we'll always be smaller than they are, and that gives us our uniqueness."

The five-year plan and Parker's work with downtown Tarboro are giving people reasons to "stay awhile."

The town is developing a non-profit to work with the Main Street program, and three committees have been created. A promotions committee assists businesses with creating events to attract traffic. An economic-development committee is working to create more downtown parking and promote a "shop local" campaign. The group also assisted the N.C. State Historic Preservation

office in creating a downtown tour of unoccupied properties. "There were 12 properties on the tour, and we have since closed on two and have a pending offer on one and interest in several others," Parker says. Finally, the design committee is creating banners for light posts and a welcome mural in the 200 block of Main Street at the entrance to downtown. A subcommittee works to identify properties for renovations.

"In the last two to two-and-a-half years, we've worked on an event series to increase traffic and exposure to our downtown businesses," Parker says.

Most annual events are in their second or third years with turnout creating renewed interest in downtown. "We call it 'opportunity space,'" Parker says. "If you ride through downtown Tarboro, you don't see much unoccupied space. We have a condensed downtown, but we keep it filled."

The event series includes the second annual SpringFest Street Fair & Food Truck Rodeo in April; Happening on the Common arts

and crafts event in May; Symphony on the Common in June with the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra; a downtown live-concert series from June through September; and a Hometown Homecoming for the high school football team, where current and former residents are encouraged to participate in downtown family activities and a Sunday worship service at the Common. The third annual Brewgrass Celebration festival is in November, and Christmas will bring horse-drawn carriages, a tree lighting and the North Carolina Symphony. The New Year's celebration will be in its third year.

"We definitely believe that there's something here for everyone," Parker says.

By 2023, Grimm says, Tarboro will be positioned to better serve its citizens and businesses while maintaining its small-town identity.

"We really don't want to outgrow ourselves," she says, "and I don't think we're going to do that. It's a happy medium. I don't think we'll get too big, but just grow enough to offer a higher quality of life." ■



*The Blount-Bridgers House, which also houses the Hobson Pittman Memorial Gallery, is a local attraction that continues to draw visitors to Tarboro.*



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# WASHINGTON'S REBIRTH

The eastern N.C. city's main street is seeing a revitalization, making it a popular spot to visit for people from nearby cities.

With waterfront views, plenty of dock space for traveling boaters and expanding small businesses, Washington is becoming a popular daytrip destination.

"This has been a strategy that the city put into effect many years ago, and little by little we're working toward finalizing that strategy," says Meg Howdy, executive director of the Washington Harbor District Alliance, a Main Street America program whose mission is downtown economic development. "It really has become a destination. Rather than say 'downtown,' we brand it the Harbor District."

Washington is celebrating its 40th year with the Main Street program, designed to assist with business growth and development. "So our support is available to all the businesses within the Harbor District," Howdy says.

The city, located on the banks of the

Pamlico River, has seen a slight decline in population since 2010. Home to about 10,000 people according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city relies on visitors and strong local businesses to drive the economy.

"Washington has really been taking this opportunity to work with properties and property owners to revitalize these historic buildings," Howdy says.

One historic building on West Main Street is a three-story former Bank of America office. Nick and Susanne Sanders, seeing promise in the building, purchased the property in 2017.

After refurbishing, the couple opened The Hackney restaurant in January 2019. They've since added an in-house gin distillery and plan eventually to create a 14-room boutique hotel on the second and third floors.

"When I got this building, it was in the hollowed-out center of town, and now all the buildings are being worked on," Nick says. "Washington has history and an amazing water-

front. What it didn't have was the infrastructure to keep people here, and we felt we could be part of that. There were a couple of other restaurants but not a lot. Now there are two or three more coming, and the upper floors of buildings are being renovated into condos. The town is becoming that kind of place where people can be occupied."

Sanders is from London, but his wife originally is from Washington. They met in Chapel Hill, while they were in UNC's MBA program. They returned to London for 24 years, but now in their 50s, Nick says, it was time to come back to North Carolina.

Instead of working for others, they decided to risk business ownership.

"When we came back looking for houses, we started looking for commercial property, and this was for sale," Nick says. "It was a prime location, right in the heart of West Main and the main thoroughfare. I think the best part is the freedom to run a business the way you want to run it, not having to answer to anyone. The worst is the pressure



*With waterfront views, plenty of dock space for traveling boaters and expanding small businesses, Washington is becoming a popular destination for visitors from throughout the region.*

and responsibility and making sure it works, and making sure the employees get paid every month.”

The couple bought the building for \$300,000. Then came what Sanders calls “a major refurb.”

The Main Street Solution Fund Grant Awards for 2017-18 were awarded to three N.C. cities — Morganton, Warrenton and Washington. The latter grant for \$200,000 went toward refurbishing The Hackney building.

“They were able to make use of the historic tax credit [federal tax program], so we worked with them, the state historic office and the local planning department to help them move forward,” Howdy says. In total, the couple received \$250,000 toward refurbishment of the building.

The Hackney serves upscale British and American cuisine (think stuffed quail, koji and bay leaf-aged ribeye, sticky toffee pudding) at din-

ner and hosts brunch as well as an afternoon tea on Sundays. The Sanders’ signature, handcrafted 1000 Piers Coastal Carolina Gin sources botanicals from local farms, and the restaurant uses four local growers for much of its ingredients. The gin, at \$34.95 a fifth, can be bought in Beaufort, Pitt, Craven and Martin counties, and there are plans to expand to other bars, restaurants and ABC stores across the state.

Howdy says this is one way the goals of the Washington Harbor District Alliance are being met. “Just like everyone else, we were affected by the economic downturn, but we are in a beautiful place, and it’s been fantastic. We have people who care about one another and want to see it flourish.”

The town’s main street, she says, has attracted a variety of businesses — antiques, jewelry and clothing stores; art studios; a barbershop; and

a bakery — and new homes are being built within walking distance.

Nick’s advice for the new business owners in the area is to be flexible. “We changed quite a few things. Some things we tried didn’t work. You have to be passionate about it,” he says. “There was a sense of, if we build it they will come, so I think we tried to do what we are capable of, and we stuck with things we have credibility with.”

The restaurant was named, in part, for the Hackney borough of London, which has seen a transition from industrial neighborhood to a spot for creativity and nightlife. “It used to be not the best, but now it’s for the young and cool,” Nick says. “So we knew coming to Washington, it would kind of be a link back to London. It’s like a rebirth.” ■

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer from eastern North Carolina.*

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