
Coastal Hyde County's Remoteness Both a Plus and a Minus

Promoters of rural Hyde County and the northeast have a message for the rest of the state: "You *can* get here from there." Hyde tourism promoter Margie Brooks says the rural county has sometimes been overlooked in the past, its route to the Outer Banks even once left off the state road map. For a long time, the isolation suited Hyde just fine. But plagued by decades of population loss, contraction of the farm economy, and declining fisheries, Hyde County leaders now are extending the welcome mat to industry and tourists alike.

The question is, will anybody come? While the county's rural remoteness is the source of its charm, it is also a handicap in economic development. Most industrial prospects, for example, want a four-lane highway. Hyde doesn't have one. Industry wants natural gas. The lines stop in neighboring Beaufort County. Firms want cultural amenities and services for their relocating executives. The closest thing Hyde has to a symphony is the bird song on Lake Mattamuskeet. As for services, with the exception of East Carolina Bank, there's hardly a retail chain outlet of any kind in the county.

Yet far from throwing in the towel, Hyde County is focusing more of its resources on economic development than at any time since the early 20th Century. Steve Bryan, a funeral director and executive director of the Greater Hyde County Chamber of Commerce, believes the current county board of commissioners has come to realize that it can no longer depend on fishing, agriculture, and government jobs to support the economy. "The county commissioners have not always been development-oriented," says Bryan. "At times even now they're skeptical. But they've made a lot of progress in the last year or two."

Having bagged a state prison and its 227 jobs paying nearly twice the prevailing local wage, the county has set its sights on attracting light industry and promoting tourism to bolster its economy. And Hyde officials have high

hopes for a 200-acre site at the county air strip, which they hope will become a hub of economic activity. A consultant's plans call for import-export facilities, a produce processing plant that would add value to fruits and vegetables grown on Hyde's rich farm land, and other light manufacturing. The county also is actively recruiting a manufacturer that would turn recyclable plastics into a material far more durable than wood for use in such products as park benches and outdoor furniture.

"If you get something, whatever it is, it is going to draw others," says Bryan. The producer of wood substitutes for outdoor products would bring about 60 jobs and a \$20 million investment, notes Bryan. That investment is far from certain, but Bryan expects that any industry of such magnitude would create spinoff development. "I expect within a year a couple of other things would pop up right around it," he says.

The site features a 4,700 foot air strip that Bryan says is long enough to land a Boeing 737 jet, and the airstrip would support the import-export activities. To the outsider, the vision of a bustling industrial park in what is now an isolated farm field may seem a little far fetched, but it isn't the first time Hyde residents have dreamed big. In the early 20th Century, an out-of-state developer decided to drain Lake Mattamuskeet and farm the lake bed. A community was founded called New Holland after a similar experiment in Holland, and what was described as the world's largest pumping station was constructed to accomplish the task of draining the lake. Ultimately, the grand experiment to tame nature failed, and in 1934, the lake became the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge—a major wintering ground for such waterfowl as the Canadian goose and the tundra swan.

And to those who assert it would take a miracle to create a bustling economy in Hyde, there is this piece of local lore: In 1874, Swan Quarter Methodists decided it was time to



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Aubrey Sewell of Land's End Seafood in Swan Quarter examines catch destined for the softshell crab market. Also pictured are Margie Brooks of the Greater Hyde County Chamber of Commerce and Hyde County Planner Alice Keeney (with crab).

establish a permanent site for their church. They picked out a prime piece of property, but the owner refused to sell, so leaders proceeded with plans to construct their building on another site. Two years later, on the eve of the church dedication, a raging Northeaster sent a flood-tide through the town that lifted the church building, carried it two blocks, and settled it squarely in the middle of the originally preferred site. With that, the owner of the property decided to deed the land over to the church, which ultimately was named Providence in recognition of the event.

Ironically, one thing in contemporary Hyde's favor is that it currently ranks as North Carolina's 11th most distressed county, meaning that a new, relocating, or expanding indus-

try would qualify for the most generous tax credit offered under the William S. Lee Quality Jobs and Business Expansion Act.¹ Under the act, the state's 15 most distressed counties qualify for state income tax credits of up to \$12,500 per job created through new or expanding industry. (See "N.C. Economic Development Incentives," pp. 23-49, for more on this topic.) To qualify, counties are ranked according to unemployment levels, per capita income, and population growth. The counties are divided into five tiers, and counties in the most economically disadvantaged tier receive the highest tax credits—a model designed to make these counties more competitive with their more developed and affluent neighbors.

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Nevertheless, in this land put on the map by goose hunting, bagging even small game in the hunt for industry is not an easy shot. The county has limited sewer facilities and is far from any market. In terms of infrastructure, in fact, it is one of the least developed of the 16 counties in the Northeastern North Carolina Regional Economic Development Partnership.

Thus, the county hopes to build on an exist-

ing strength—its natural beauty—by promoting tourism. “Tourism is economic development,” says Bryan, noting that a thriving tourism economy would bring more local services. “There is so much that we don’t have, and tourism allows us to have some of that.”

But even the county’s tourism aspirations seem something of a long shot, except on the island of Ocracoke—a Hyde County satellite ac-



Steve Bryan, a funeral director and executive director of the Greater Hyde County Chamber of Commerce, pictured with the building that once housed the “world’s largest pumping station”—intended to drain Lake Mattamuskeet. The building is now being restored and is central to tourism development efforts in Hyde County.

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cessible by two-and-a-half hour ferry ride from Swan Quarter. Ocracoke features a quaint fishing village and miles of national seashore that is off limits to development. It is also teeming with tourists. The rest of Hyde County—though blessed with its own brand of natural beauty and a sound reputation with hunters and fishermen—has no beaches to serve as a tourist magnet and few facilities or services to accommodate tourists if they did want to come. Margie Brooks, chairperson of the chamber of commerce's tourism committee, believes that could change. "We've got everything that makes up heritage tourism," says Brooks, "history, culture, and natural beauty. People nowadays are looking for a way to get away from it all."

And for those who want to get away from it all, Hyde is certainly the right place to go. The county covers 642 square miles, but a visitor wishing to drop a few coins into the local economy and create a ripple effect would find a precious small pool. The two largest towns—Swan Quarter and Engelhard, have less than 3,000 residents between them, but they seem like big cities compared to Gull Rock, Nebraska, and Alligator Lake. The county boasts only a handful of motels, campgrounds, and restaurants. Hyde residents conducted a bake sale to raise the \$500 required to get the county listed on the Historic Albemarle Tour, a driving tour of the region, and the chamber sometimes runs out of promotional brochures and lacks the funds to reprint them.

But while some might see Hyde's rural isolation as an insurmountable obstacle, others see opportunity. One chamber brochure urges vacationers to "Take the Road Less Traveled." Under the heading, "What Hyde Lacks," the same brochure has this to say: "What is missing in Hyde? Crowded conditions, large shopping malls, stoplights, concrete jungles, and wall-to-wall people are alien to this goodly land."

Alice Keeney is a recently hired planner and developer who relocated from Baltimore but was raised in rural Carteret County. "We're one of the last places in eastern North Carolina that is untouched," says Keeney. "We want to try to keep our rural flavor while developing. What I see is preserving the rural landscape but

still creating opportunities. We are in a world where you don't have to have a big fancy office to get your job done."

Among the county's resources are four wildlife refuges where such activities as kayaking, bird watching, and nature tours could be promoted, as well as harbors in Engelhard and Swan Quarter that could support marina development. The chamber sponsors three events that attract outsiders: an art show and sale, a bicycle tour, and Swan Days, an annual nature festival celebrating the return of the tundra swan. To accommodate more visitors, the chamber is attempting to attract a 50-room motel chain that specializes in rural areas with no other chain competition, but so far the chain has not been able to attract enough local investors. Ever the salesman, chamber head Steve Bryan plans to round up a few local residents and take them to visit the chain's Ashe County property in western North Carolina.

The aim of all this activity ultimately is to build a local economy strong enough to get Hyde County growing again. The county ranked last in the state in population growth from 1990 to 1995, losing 3.7 percent of its population in that five-year period alone. In 1996, the county unemployment rate averaged 9.6 percent, and according to the latest Census, its poverty rate stands at 24 percent. Local officials hope to provide at least the option for county youth to remain in or return to the county to work when they complete their formal schooling. "We continue to see the out migration of our young people," says Bryan. "They end up in occupations where there are no jobs here, so they wind up some place else."

Says Troy Lane Mayo, Chairman of the Hyde County Board of Commissioners, "We're trying to learn, and we're trying to grow to the point that we can sustain ourselves, and that's our goal, but its hard to do when you're in a fishing and farming region."

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTE

¹The William S. Lee Quality Jobs and Business Expansion Act, 1996 N.C. Session Laws, Chapter 13 (2nd Extra Session), House Bill 18, 1996.