

Others say the impact on the community goes beyond even that. "If you want a strong educational system in your county, you've got to have good teachers," says former Lieutenant Governor Bob Jordan, now a Mt. Gilead business owner. "If you don't have good affordable housing, it doesn't always mean people won't take the jobs, but they can't live there, and that means they don't spend their dollars in your community. They don't join your churches. They don't bring their strength to your everyday community."

A recent study by East Carolina University's Regional Development Institute found that over the past two decades, counties in northeastern North Carolina have received more money through the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, which is typically directed toward housing production, than counties in the western part of the state. Over the past two decades, people who live in the Northeast have received more than twice as much per capita through the program as those who live in the West. But while the

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## *Outhouses Not Completely Out in Eastern North Carolina*

Walking out into a cold rainy night to use the toilet is almost unfathomable for North Carolinians who live in the more affluent, developed areas of the Tar Heel state. Still, the concept isn't as foreign to those who live in the state's rural areas, including areas in the East.

At the 1990 census, North Carolina ranked 12th in the nation for the percent (1.8 percent) of residential units lacking indoor plumbing (49,528 of 2.8 million homes). In response, former Governor James B. Hunt Jr. and other state officials announced a plan to eliminate outhouses by assembling funds and volunteers to build bathrooms into existing houses.

Fortunately, results from the 2000 census suggest that their efforts at least partially addressed the outdated use of outhouses by effectively reducing the state's number of households relying on outdoor privies. Outhouses, besides being extremely inconvenient, create a public health issue by increasing the chances that raw sewage will seep into groundwater, thus increasing the chances of fecal coliform contamination in drinking water. North Carolina's rank in number of outhouses fell significantly to 34th, reflecting about 13,100 houses with outdoor toilets compared with more than 33,000 in 1990—a reduction of 60 percent. However, in contrast to 1990, the 2000 census did not count houses having indoor fixtures with pipes emptying directly into ditches or streams—an approach

known as straight piping and also an unacceptable means of waste disposal that can pose a considerable health threat.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, while the decreasing statewide numbers are encouraging, the changes in methods in the census survey may underestimate North Carolina's plumbing problems.

According to Sharon LaPalme, associate director of the N.C. Rural Communities Assistance Project, a private nonprofit group based in Pittsboro, surveys in some counties have found many homes with complete indoor plumbing emptying directly into a ditch, stream, or failed septic system. "With sewage disposal in particular, these recent survey efforts (by the U.S. Census) definitely suggest there's an undercount," LaPalme says.<sup>2</sup> Still, the size of the decline almost certainly means that fewer people are braving the elements to simply visit the restroom and that less raw sewage is soaking into North Carolina soil and contaminating underground water supplies.

—Joanne Scharer

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Progress on privies," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., August 12, 2001, p. A26.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Stradling, "State's outhouses on way out," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., August 6, 2001, p. A1.

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