

Orange Is Out of Step With Growth – and Likes It

Double-digit growth is happening in nearly every corner of the Triangle, but Orange County is not part of the trend, and officials say that is the result of growing smart!

The numbers certainly set Orange apart. Population in Wake County is up nearly 26 percent since 2000. Johnston County grew 24 percent, Chatham 17 percent and Durham County 10. Orange has grown 7 percent.

In Orange County, much of the land is consciously left untouched.

“We take pride in trying to protect our environment and balancing growth with some of the social justice issues,” said Barry Jacobs, one of the Orange County commissioners.

That approach to growth that attracts many newcomers. Stephanie Basclici said she was looking to get away from urban sprawl.

“That’s not what I’m looking for. Growth at any cost is not worth it to me,” Basclici said while shopping in Hillsborough.

Jacobs said that unlike other counties, Orange is careful not to let development outpace infrastructure needs. Both of the county’s school systems —the Orange County Schools and the Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools — are in sync with the growth, he said.

“We also have a reputation of being rigorous in approving developments,” Jacobs noted.

Developers in the county have to pay a school impact fee, which means \$3,000 per single-family home. In Chapel Hill, the charge is \$4,400 a house.

Others say the approach has drawbacks.

“The problem is (that) the supply of housing choices in Orange County is limited,” said Nick Tennyson, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Durham, Orange and Chatham Counties.

Short supply keeps home prices on the high end, and there are other effects on the neighbors.

“Orange County has made some public-policy decisions resulting in strong growth in Alamance, southern Durham and north Chatham counties,” said Tennyson, a former Durham mayor.

“We’re looking for growth that blends in with the community, that in 100 years from now, it will still make people say this is a great place to live,” said Tom Stevens, mayor of Hillsborough, the Orange County seat.

Leaders predict a faster growth rate for the future, but they say they will not give up the character that’s Orange County.

Orange County is overhauling its comprehensive plan and expects that work to be finished in a year.

County Commissioner Barry Jacobs is a professional writer and creates a sports blog for WRAL.com as one of his products.

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