

Could growth hobble Wake?

Schools crunch isn't the only worry

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Apex bills itself as "the peak of good living," but after parents there and in other Wake towns successfully sued to block one solution to school crowding -- mandatory year-round schools -- the motto morphed into a question for all of Wake County: "Has the good life peaked?"

After years of enjoying bountiful growth and low taxes, Wake County might be coming to a point where paying the price of adding 36,000 residents a year can no longer be postponed.

The school crisis is one sign of that pressure. Next may be clogged roads, crowded parks, permanent water restrictions, rising taxes and even growth moratoriums.

A committee of community leaders concluded last year that the cost of the county's basic needs will exceed available funds by \$11 billion over the next 25 years.

"We are now at a critical juncture as rapid growth tests our renowned life quality," the committee warned.

Many residents remain optimistic about Wake's future. And yet as the region's basic services fall behind -- especially schools and roads -- more and more residents fear that promises of the good life aren't being met.

"There are a lot of things I love here," said legal assistant Beth Christo, 44, of Holly Springs. "But this 'Camelot' thing they try to sell people is false advertising. We've got a lot of issues that need to be solved. Leaders here have not been able to keep up with the growth."

Local leaders who have encouraged the boom are struggling to meet public expectations.

"If anything, we underestimated how popular Raleigh and Wake County would be," Wake Commissioner Joe Bryan said Friday. "But there is planning. And there is the long-term planning of having the financial resources there to meet those needs."

Meeting those needs will depend, though, on raising property taxes dramatically or establishing new taxes and fees to help growth pay its way, county officials say. Among the options state and local elected officials are considering: an extra penny per dollar on the local sales tax, "impact fees" on new houses, and a "transfer tax" on home sales. Each has supporters and opponents.

Public opinion on taxes and fees varies widely, and elected officials are reluctant to get too far ahead of voters.

"The question," Bryan said, "is what the community will support."

And that might turn on how much more civic strain people are willing to endure.

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Emerging fault lines

Many residents are happy with life here, but some are calling for restrictions such as freezing permits for new homes, at least until school and road construction catches up.

"Municipalities need to come to terms with the fact that unlimited growth has consequences," said graduate student Erin Kalbarczyk, 56, of Apex.

Others favor continued growth but want it handled better.

"When I watch the town council meetings, I always see the hot debates because the color of a builder's plans is not appropriate or does not match the council's taste," said Julea Danielson, 36, of Cary, a SAS project manager. "I never hear discussion of, hey, how many extra police, garbage disposal, firemen, schools, or other infrastructure is needed?"

High-growth areas often have similar challenges, but they're all fortunate, said Harvey Schmitt, president of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce.

"We've got problems that lots of communities would love to have," he said. "Eventually the community has to take care of itself, or you get gridlock and you lose quality of life."

County leaders point out that Wake voters will be asked this fall to support bond financing for an expansion of Wake Technical Community College, new libraries, and the preservation of open space for recreation and water-quality protection.

They're considering another big school bond referendum in the next year or two.

And a new courthouse, more county offices and a new parking deck are planned for downtown Raleigh in the next few years.

More jobs, more kids

Wake residents may be facing more in taxes and fees, but that higher payout comes amid rising earnings. Wake's income per resident climbed 56 percent from 1980 to 2005, to more than \$30,000. Typical household income rose 18 percent, to almost \$56,000.

Wake leaders hope to add 50,000 jobs in five years while expanding the region's tax base and boosting residents' income. The county wants to draw high-tech, high-paying jobs.

"Quality economic growth generates a cycle that can accomplish a higher standard of living for all Wake County residents," the county's advisory committee said.

But many of those new workers will have children.

When Allison Hardwick lived in Virginia, children attended schools in their own neighborhoods. There were no annual reassignment plans.

When she arrived at North Raleigh's Wakefield Plantation four years ago, she found children routinely reassigned to new schools to accommodate growth and maintain socioeconomic diversity in each school's population.

"It's quite disappointing that my children don't go to school with the children who they see in their neighborhood or other activities," Hardwick said.

Soon Hardwick may make another adjustment. Wakefield Elementary School is one of 22 schools slated for conversion to a year-round calendar in July.

Money crunch

The schools are tight because the school budget is squeezed. The school board cannot impose taxes: That falls to the county commissioners. But school leaders and county commissioners have feared voter rejection since a failed school bond in 1999. They are wary of bond referendums that require big tax increases.

Some local officials say the General Assembly should either let Wake's school board tax residents to pay for schools, or let county commissioners build them. They say it would streamline the process and strengthen public accountability.

The latest battle over year-round schools has sent some of the school system's parents to the courts for resolution. Now school leaders are asking parents whether they want to send their children to year-round schools instead of assigning students to the schools.

For some parents, the education their children receive outweighs the upheaval.

"I care about good schools," said Cheryl Goldberg, who moved from California four years ago. "And I think Wake County is delivering."

Wake's ability to deliver quality is being pounded by waves of growth. Next year, the school population is expected to grow by 8,000 students. Enrollment in Wake schools has grown by more than 40,000 students in the past decade.

Traffic builds

The debate over crowded schools is compounded by complaints about traffic. Christo, the legal assistant, said it takes her at least 40 minutes to drive 17 miles from her Holly Springs home to her Raleigh office.

"It's so hard getting out in the morning, I have to leave at 7," she said. "What are they going to do about that? The attitude here seems to be: If we ignore the problem, maybe it will go away."

The number of daily vehicle miles traveled on Triangle roads and highways has tripled in 20 years to almost 30 million miles a year, local officials say. That number is expected to double in the next 25 years as commutes grow steadily longer.

Pressure on parks

Parks, arts and recreation are a big draw to newcomers, but as the population has increased, the ability to meet residents' recreational needs has not kept pace.

Planners say residential development has made acquiring land for various amenities difficult. Nonetheless, planners said, residents are moving to the area with expectations of having fields to play lacrosse, rugby and cricket as well as more traditional sports such as football, baseball and soccer.

"And it's not just people who have children. These are adults who want to be active," said Chris Snow, director of Wake County's Parks, Recreation and Open Space department.

Answering part of the demand for facilities, Raleigh voters approved a bond issue in 2003 for parks and greenways.

"This isn't really different than any other infrastructure," said David Shouse, a park planner with the city of Raleigh. "The more people, the more demands."

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