

Small-town USA goes 'micropolitan'

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ROANOKE RAPIDS, N.C. — For many travelers on Interstate 95, this old mill town is merely a pit stop halfway between New York and Florida. They fill their tanks, satisfy their craving for Carolina barbecue, crash for the night at the Sleep Inn and drive away from the fields of peanuts, cotton and tobacco. Avid fishermen sometimes stay an extra day to catch rockfish in the Roanoke River.



"Micropolitans" are becoming economic hubs, drawing workers and shoppers from miles around.

Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

But for residents of two largely rural counties just south of the Virginia border, Roanoke Rapids is "the city" that anchors an area of 76,000 people. Wal-Mart and Lowe's just opened stores, helping replace jobs that vanished with the textile industry. A multiplex theater is on the way. Business is booming for Ruby Tuesday, Cracker Barrel and other chain restaurants. And in the ultimate sign that this isn't the backwoods anymore, Starbucks is coming.

Roanoke Rapids and hundreds of small cities like it were long written off as rural outposts where population was sparse and the economy sleepy. They were known simply as "non-metropolitan" areas.

Until now.

The government has created a new label for these communities, which increasingly fill the gaps on the map between major cities. The new term — Micropolitan Statistical Areas — recognizes that even small places far from metro areas are economic hubs that draw workers and shoppers from miles around.

For scholars and urban planners, the new category more accurately reflects changes across the country brought on by development, migration and the shift from farming and manufacturing to an economy dominated by service industries.

For marketing experts who help companies decide where to expand, the "micropolitans" represent potentially lucrative — and untapped — markets. More than 28 million people, or one in 10 Americans, live in such areas.

"Businesses used to look at these places and see *Green Acres*," says Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "Now they look at them and just see 'green.' "

Finding new markets

Branding these places recognizes what Wal-Mart has known for years: It doesn't take a big city to create an urban economy.

For the 565 small U.S. cities at the center of these "micros," the official identity lets them market themselves as economic entities that extend far beyond city limits.

"A small town can anchor a lot of regional growth around it," says Lang, who analyzed the new micros. "Now, they're on the map. They've got names."

Names attached to population clusters get the attention of retailers in search of new markets, says George Whalin, chief executive of Retail Management Consultants in San Marcos, Calif. "They're going to look closely at them."

Every year at the International Council of Shopping Centers convention, mayors and councilmen from across the country lobby developers to come to their towns. "This gives them another tool," Whalin says.

The growth of these communities into an economic force comes as rural America continues to shrink. Lang's research shows that more than half of the land area in the continental USA lies in either metropolitan or micropolitan areas. "Rural areas now for the first time make up the minority share," he says.

"The new classification adds a really important new dimension in understanding what really goes on in rural and small-town America," says John Cromartie, geographer and population specialist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Some of Lang's findings are surprising:

- **"Micro" doesn't always mean small.** The largest micropolitan areas have more people than many metro areas. The Torrington, Conn., micropolitan area is the largest, with a population of 183,000 — bigger than the population of 103 metropolitan areas. Torrington is a micro, not a metro, because the central city has fewer than 50,000 people, the threshold for a city anchoring a metro area. Cities at the centers of micropolitan areas have at least 10,000 people but no more than 49,999.

- **Sprawl is not just a big-city problem.** Because small cities outside metropolitan areas have a lot of open land around them, their suburbs can be miles away. "Micros are more suburban because they're born sprawling," Lang says.

- **Growth is occurring even in remote areas.** Some of the fastest-growing micropolitan areas are near mountain resorts and national parks or areas that are warm in winter. Tourists and retirees looking to escape congestion and cold have helped create some micros.

"We're a micropolitan area?" asks a puzzled Art Elkins, city clerk and treasurer of Sheridan, Wyo., population 15,804. "Micro' I can understand. But we're very isolated. I would describe us as rural."

The pioneer town, which hosts an annual rodeo, is 15 miles from the Big Horn Mountains and Bighorn National Forest on the Montana border. Aside from methane gas development nearby, Sheridan was always largely agricultural.

But motels are opening. A Super Wal-Mart is luring shoppers from southern Montana. Retirees are building upscale homes on onetime farmland. And Sheridan's micropolitan area has more than 26,000 people.

Small-town advantages

Jack Schultz recently wrote *Boomtown USA: The 7½ Keys to Big Success in Small Towns*. As the head of Agracel, an industrial development company based in Effingham, Ill., Schultz recruits manufacturing and high-tech businesses to small towns he calls "agurbs."

He did it in his hometown of Effingham, a micropolitan area of more than 34,000 people. When the city lost major manufacturers, Schultz led an effort to build the 1.43-mile Effingham Railroad to create a connection with two major rail lines. As a result, Krispy Kreme came to town.

"We're too small to have a Krispy Kreme store, but we've got their national manufacturing facility," Schultz says. "People from large cities have the stereotype of small towns as being backward and not offering any advantages."

The advantages are plenty, he says: cheaper land, cheaper construction, lower labor rates and a small-town quality of life.

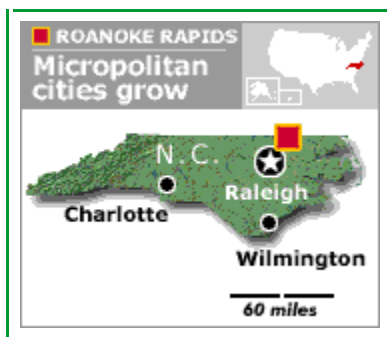
Small towns that have good highways and rail lines have huge advantages. It's no wonder that along the 1,907 miles of I-95 from the Canadian border in Maine to Miami, only five counties remain rural, too sparsely populated to qualify as a micro area. Two are in northern Maine, one in southern Virginia and two in South Carolina.

"Anybody who's been on the 1960s lonely ride down I-95 to Florida with their parents would recognize how much it's changed," Lang says. "Little cities have been built in the place of orange stands in Florida and peanut stands in the Carolinas. ... There was a time when most of I-95 was open, and now the openings are few and far between."

Rural and urban

The Census no longer lists Roanoke Rapids as just a small city of 17,000 people and less than 8 square miles. It's now a micropolitan area of more than 76,000 people and 1,360 square miles that includes Halifax County and rural Northampton County next door.

City Manager Rick Benton didn't know until recently that he lives in a micro area, but he didn't need the federal government to tell him that economic growth is reshaping Roanoke Rapids.



"We're in a rural area, but Roanoke Rapids is really an urban center," he says.

With an unemployment rate around 9%, Halifax County is one of North Carolina's most economically depressed counties. The county recently hired an economic development director to market the region's connection to I-95, two small power plants, expanses of land, lakefront properties for vacationers and retirees and quality of life.

"We're blessed with a lot of infrastructure, with water, a wastewater-treatment plant and acres and acres," says Ron Baker, in charge of economic development. "We've got lots of dirt."

Groundbreaking for an airport with a runway long enough to accommodate corporate jets and private planes is scheduled in June. Big-box retailers and hotels have come in. Lowe's created 800 jobs when it opened a distribution center in Northampton County. And expensive, custom-built homes are filling lots along Lake Gaston.

The old mills that kept Roanoke Rapids going for decades were at the center of the movement to unionize textile workers, made famous by *Norma Rae*, a movie about a local worker.

The mills are gone, and the 100-year-old houses that workers lived in are decrepit. Mayor Drewery Beale is using federal grants to refurbish the homes to encourage ownership among low-income families. "Whoever thought the sounds of looms and whistles at the mills would end?" says Beale, who grew up in the neighborhood. "We need to change our way of thinking."

On the other side of I-95, Johnny Draper, mayor of the neighboring town of Weldon, wants to revive a deserted downtown where six department stores once thrived. Only one variety store is left. The town of 1,400 wants to capitalize on its recreational and historical assets. The old train station is a public library. A broadcast group is in the old railroad warehouse. There is talk of turning a whole block into shops on the street level and loft apartments above.

"We need to push antiques and historic places," Draper says.

Joyce Ross is doing her share. A Roanoke Rapids native who had moved to Rocky Mount about 35 miles away, she recently bought two buildings in downtown Weldon. She's opening a home furnishings store, a bar and a restaurant.

"I'm 59 years old and didn't have a thing to do," Ross says.

Ross is targeting tourists and the upscale homeowners of lakefront homes, many who moved from Northern states. Her two sisters also have moved home.

"Somebody's finally going to recognize that communities of 50,000 or 60,000 have a lot to offer but don't have the problems of bigger cities," Draper says.

"We want our kids to have education and come back home to live. ... (This) may put us on the map."