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Union working to provide basic needs: Carpenter

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Ken Elkins](#) Staff writer

Jim Carpenter, president of the [Union County Chamber of Commerce](#), says a lot of the county's problems can be categorized under one heading: growth management.

Union has been whipsawed in dramatic fashion in recent years. The county's popularity for housing among commuters to Charlotte has tested its ability to add water and sewer capacity. The residential boom also has created pressures for Union officials to attract industrial companies whose property taxes would finance infrastructure needs.

Now, the sudden collapse of the housing sector means the county is suffering from a glut of homes on the market.

Resolving the problems of boom and bust will require "the art of political compromise" among the county's leaders as they tackle the issues, Carpenter says.

The meetings of the Union Board of County Commissioners are often contentious, but Carpenter believes all local infrastructure problems can be lessened with time and work.

Carpenter recently spoke to the *Charlotte Business Journal* about some possible solutions to those issues. Following are edited excerpts from that conversation:

Are you concerned about the housing market in Union County with the decline in permits and increase in foreclosures, particularly after the county had such sustained home-building activity?

Yes. Existing inventory needs to be absorbed. The mortgage-lending crunch is an obvious factor. The biggest challenge is the need to increase water-sewer treatment capacity, now at maximum. A controversial adequate public facilities ordinance adds to the price of new homes in overcrowded school districts to fund school construction. Its impact is hard to measure in relation to tough market conditions.

Are there any solutions on the horizon for sewer and water treatment capacity?

For sewer, the county has 6 million gallons per day in treatment capacity at its plant in Waxhaw. An additional 1.9 million gallons are treated in Indian Trail. About 1 million gallons per day are diverted to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities' Pineville plant. A line is being planned that will allow diversion of 1.5 million gallons to Pineville from the Waxhaw plant, opening up additional capacity in the high-growth area it serves.

Discussions are ongoing to either expand sewer capacities through a joint venture with Monroe or by constructing another treatment facility. It will take several years to add additional capacity under any scenario.

As for water capacity, Union County shares joint ownership with Lancaster County of a 36 million-gallon-per-day water-treatment facility on the Catawba River. Union has access to 18 million gallons and utilizes all of it. On at least four occasions last summer, Union's use exceeded its allocation by up to 3 million gallons.

The board of county commissioners is working with Lancaster to expand the Catawba River plant to bring additional capacity to our county.

Union County has a contractual agreement with Anson County to purchase up to 4 million gallons from its water source. However, line capacity limits availability to 1 million gallons. A new line is under design that would accommodate the entire 4 million gallons.

Discussions are ongoing for a long-term agreement with Anson for expansion that would provide Union County with 20 million gallons or more. Negotiations are occurring with other neighboring counties to explore partnering to increase treated-water capacity.

How will the Monroe Bypass affect the area? Will it take shoppers away from the U.S. Highway 74 business corridor?

The Monroe Connector-Bypass will relieve congestion on U.S. 74 and allow locals to "reclaim" the highway. Reduction of congestion and improved traffic flow will improve retail access.

Through-traffic that will opt for the bypass does not currently generate retail sales along U.S. 74 other than at restaurants, gas stations and motels.

These types of establishments will likely spring up at interchanges along the bypass and compete with those on U.S. 74. Much of the motel business is corporate and should not be adversely impacted.

Manufacturing continues to be an important element of the local economy. Does Union County need to develop its own industrial parks and

speculative buildings to build its manufacturing base?

Yes. Lack of available product is a major detriment to industrial recruitment throughout the Charlotte region and especially in Union County. The Monroe Corporate Center adjacent to the airport is booming, but there are limits on its expansion.

Our economic developers envision an additional business park. Completion of the long-awaited Monroe Connector-Bypass freeway will also improve competitiveness.

Should the county be concerned that it has become more of a bedroom community for Charlotte? How does that affect tax receipts?

A healthy tax base consists of 60% residential and 40% industrial and commercial. Industrial and commercial properties contribute far more in property taxes than do residences.

Union County is 87% residential. New homes mean new schools, and education is the largest expenditure in the county's budget. Citizens have approved \$400 million in school bonds since 1998, and their reward is the need for another \$800 million more.

Without growth in our non-residential tax base, Union County will continue to experience pressures that translate to higher taxes and increased debt.

Reflect a little on the many changes you have seen during your tenure at the chamber.

During my 16 years here, the county's population has doubled and so has the number of incorporated towns. The centers of population and power have gravitated to the Charlotte bedroom communities in western Union County.

A reputation for excellent schools, excellent quality of life and bucolic living are a magnet for newcomers to the Charlotte region. Newcomers and longtime residents often have differing priorities and need to better understand each other to reach a consensus in addressing opportunities.

Details, Details

Name: Jim Carpenter

Age: 62

Native: Charlotte

Residence: Union County

Family: Divorced with two adult daughters, Alison and Elizabeth

Education: UNC Charlotte, bachelor's in geography and sociology, 1971; University of South Carolina, master's in geography, 1973

Career: Beaufort, S.C., Joint Planning Commission, deputy director, 1974-77; York community-development director, city manager, 1977-82; Charlotte Chamber, vice president of public affairs, 1982-85; South Carolina Business & Industry Political Education Committee, vice president, 1985-91; Printing Industry of Carolinas, president, 1991-92; Union County Chamber of Commerce, president, 1993-present

Civic/volunteer activities: Wingate University Business School Advisory Committee, member; Monroe Tourism & Visitors Bureau, board member; Downtown Monroe Inc., board member; Monroe-Union County Community Development Corp., board member; Job Ready Partnership of Union County, board member; Charlotte Regional Roads Committee, member

Last book read: *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, Kevin Phillips

Favorite movie: *The Best Years of Our Lives*

Spare-time activities: Exercise, travel, old movies, music, college football, photography, performing arts, art

Staff writer Ken Elkins can be reached at (704) 973-1101 or kelkins@bizjournals.com.

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