

Lake Wylie coping with growing pains

Northern York County residents working to control development to preserve area's rural character

By Charles Perry · & 2008 cperry@heraldonline.com
Updated 11/16/08 - 1:47 AM |

LAKE WYLIE -- Matt Cullen moved to Lake Wylie for the same reasons he says many people do.

The New Jersey native, who came here from Portland, Ore., four years ago, liked the schools, the weather and what he considers reasonable taxes.

But he's concerned about how this unincorporated territory will grow and what it will look like as more people, like him, move here.



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A truck passes by the Walgreens under construction off S.C. 274 in Lake Wylie. The once sleepy northern York County community is seeing new homes and businesses.

"This has been on its way to becoming a town," he said. "It seems to be at some sort of adolescent stage."

The next step in the growing process began Saturday, when a 117,000-square-foot Lowe's Home Improvement store opened in what was once a sleepy rural community.

The store is part of Mill Creek Commons, a shopping center at the Three Points intersection of S.C. 557 and S.C. 274.

Plans are in place for a Walgreens, a McDonald's and a Wal-Mart in the area, county officials say. Two commercial banks are eyeing space, too.

"I think we're all torn," Cullen said about the community. "It's nice to have all these conveniences and see this town forming, and there are prices to be paid for that."

Growth means more lights and a less sleepy community. With it come questions about traffic and roads and how close buildings and homes should be to those roads.

Simply put, how much growth is too much and how do you control it?

To address these kinds of questions, various homeowners associations have formed the Lake Wylie Civic Association, a group that's been meeting for eight months. Cullen is vice chairman of the association.

"Everything we've done in all our lives has turned out a whole lot better if we've given it a little forethought," he said. "What we're trying to do is form committees to study the different kinds of problems, different kinds of issues. You've got to worry about the schools, the lake and the character."

While Lake Wylie has rapidly expanded in recent years, growth has slowed as the housing market -- and the economy -- became sluggish.

Dave Pettine, the county's zoning administrator, said this year the county hasn't received many requests for commercial or residential development in the Lake Wylie area.

"Even though we've had so much growth, right now it's come to a screeching halt," said County Councilman and developer Tom Smith, who represents Lake Wylie. "It's bad out there."

Despite the problems caused by an economic slowdown, one benefit of stalled growth is that it's given leaders time to plan.

Now, Smith said, leaders can update ordinances and other guidelines to ease future growing pains.

"What it affords us the opportunity to do," he said, "is take a step back and look how we can prepare for the growth in the future when it does pick back up."

But Smith acknowledges that even the best plans can't build or buy homes.

"Just because you do it," he said, "doesn't mean people come anymore."

But county officials do anticipate that road projects such as the widening of S.C. 274 will spur growth.

Available land, the draw of the lake and the area's proximity to Charlotte are factors that put Lake Wylie in a strong position to continue growing when the economy rebounds.

Those qualities certainly attracted Cullen, and he believes they will continue to draw others as well.

His goal for the community, though, is to be prepared.

"We can allow it to grow," he said, "and keep the character."

Lowe's Home Improvement in Lake Wylie opened Saturday. A "board cutting" and other grand opening festivities will be held at 10 a.m. Thursday.

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