

“A NEWCOMER’S PERSPECTIVE”

ROWAN SALISBURY COMMUNITY FORUM – 3/6/2014

By President Brien Lewis

Before I moved here nearly two years ago, what did I know about Rowan County and Salisbury?

Stops between Rock Hill and Burlington: gas/tea/Starbuck’s.

Never ventured downtown – nothing called me to do so, to go beyond the interstate exit and its immediate surroundings.

First visit with Josh – first impressions: beautiful downtown – made me want to get out, walk around, explore - but nothing let me know Catawba College was here - or, for that matter, Livingstone, Hood, or RCCC. No sense of it being a “college town”.

Went on to the campus – suddenly realized we were there – not really a “sense of arrival” – as you have seen from banners and other improvements – and as you will see as we unveil details of our campus master plan - we plan to address that.

Have had constructive conversations with my counterparts at the higher ed institutions and with community leaders – I believe there is a shared sense of opportunity for raising our profile as an education center, perhaps even for branding ourselves in some ways that will attract people as visitors, as students, perhaps as long-time residents.

But let me take off my Catawba President’s hat for a moment, at least to some degree. What do I see as a fellow citizen, a fellow resident?

I had done a lot of research on Catawba during my time as a candidate – but not nearly as much about Rowan County and Salisbury. My expectations were pretty minimal. Though I grew up in the downtown

heart of a cosmopolitan mega-city, Toronto, I had lived very happily for the prior 18 years or so in similarly sized and situated communities: Burlington, North Carolina and the Rock Hill-Fort Mill area in South Carolina. Places with textiles and railways in their history. Places that were to some degree “bedroom communities” for larger cities nearby.

I was not prepared for what I found here.

- Remarkable cultural opportunities – my father calculated more theatre seats and productions per capita here than in Toronto, which has one of the most active theatre scenes in the world. Waterworks. The Symphony. Pops at the Post.
- Fascinating history – in many cases lovingly restored and maintained – not just the places but the stories.
- Amazing people. Without a doubt the most philanthropic-minded, most giving community I have ever been part of. Not a week goes by without some major fundraising event – most of them not just for a good cause but done with style, creativity, and with care. And many folks come to all of them – they support not just their “pet project” but yours and mine too. It led someone to note that a syndrome effected people in this community: FOMA – it stands for Fear of Missing Anything! I guess that may be one reason we have such a good crowd here today.

And surrounding all of the above – a real, palpable sense of opportunity. Entrepreneurs, community activists, creative thinkers – all with a shared goal of making Rowan County reach its full potential. Aligns perfectly with Catawba’s Mission Statement: we speak of an education rich in personal attention, that blends liberal studies with career preparation, with the objective of preparing our students to reach their highest potential. Change a couple of nouns and you really

have a mission statement for this community. Not one that is out of reach – one that so many are already committed to achieving.

So what is the economic context in which we are operating – as a state, a region, a county? Here are some data points and examples of forward momentum that struck me as compelling.

Statewide:

- N.C. Has seen 10 straight years of population influx
- Forbes names North Carolina 4th best state for business and careers

People should want to come to NC – and they are doing so!

The nearby Charlotte metro area:

- Charlotte is one of the nation's most affordable metro areas to live.
- In fact, of the top 40 metro markets in the U.S., Charlotte ranks 13th in affordability: at 95.4 percent of the national average.

Rowan County:

- Jobs lost between 2007-2009: Rowan County has recovered 45% of those lost jobs and Catawba County has only recovered 16% of the jobs they lost.

Per NC Employment Security Commission:

- Rowan's unemployment rate was 9.7% on 12/31/12 – as of 12/31/13 it was 7.3%

Per NC Department of Revenue:

- Rowan's taxable sales \$74.2 million for last quarter of 2012 – for last quarter of 2013 it was \$83.1 million

Per Salisbury/Rowan Association of Realtors:

- Average price for home sold was nearly \$137 thousand for last quarter of 2012, for last quarter of 2013 it was over \$152 thousand.

Per Rowan County Inspection Office:

- # of building permits up and value of permits increased from \$9.6 million for last quarter of 2012 – for last quarter of 2013 it was just under \$15 million

Integro and Salisbury Business Center up, running, and available

"The enthusiasm in Salisbury has been fantastic, absolutely off the charts," Integro's owner was quoted as saying. "We can't say enough about the community, they've been very welcoming to us."

Salisbury Post: Textile manufacturing returns to Rowan

- Gildan Activewear and Tuscarora Yarns, \$260 million plus investment and about 700 jobs planned for Rowan and Davie
- From 2003 to 2009, Rowan went from more than 1,200 jobs in 21 textile mills and plants to just 296 jobs in seven facilities.

- Today, nearly 700 people in Rowan work in textile and apparel manufacturing.
- Manufacturing is now the second largest industry cluster in Rowan, behind health and education.

Salisbury Post: RCCC responds to demand for qualified workers for new textile jobs

RCCC has been focused on retooling the workforce that came out of the old manufacturing world. “Manufacturing is not dead, but it’s different,” Jeanie Moore said.

- With state funding, RCCC also offers nine customized training programs for specific employers.
- So far, 42 Gildan workers are enrolled as RCCC students for customized training.
- The college conducts on-site job training at about 100 locations annually.

I am excited to see that RCCC is having such a direct impact.

We are, of course, not without our challenges. That is why we are here today.

- Attracting business and investment.
- Strengthening our schools – first because it is the right thing to do by our children but also because we can’t attract businesses, investors, and employees to come and to stay if they don’t think it is a community where their children can flourish.

- Resolving differences. Recognizing that in many cases it doesn't have to be "one thing or the other" or "one way or the other". I want to see a thriving, vibrant downtown Salisbury – Catawba has already made a commitment to a presence there:
- ***Downtown Catawba: We will soon be opening an innovative new "storefront" space downtown in the Plaza building at the corner of Main Street and West Innes Street. The space will feature admissions information as well as the latest on our athletic, theatre and music events (and the opportunity to buy tickets for them). We will also be selling Catawba clothing and related items. Plans are taking shape to offer some special programming at our Downtown spot, including musical performances, readings, and other presentations. Keep an eye out for more details soon!***
- And as much as I want to see a thriving, vibrant downtown Salisbury, I want to see a thriving, vibrant area in and around the West End Plaza. I would be very interested in exploring options for Catawba to have a presence there as well.
- I want to see a thriving, vibrant China Grove and Landis and a whole series of thriving, vibrant places and people all across Rowan County.
- Places you want to start or expand a business. Places you want people to visit and stay a while. Places you want to raise a family. Places you want to proudly call home.
- Why? Because I am selfish. As the CEO of a major employer here, I want to attract and keep excellent employees. As a resident, I want interesting places for me and my family to eat,

to shop, and to explore. As a citizen, I want to be part of something positive and sustainable.

I have never been happier in a community than I have these last two years in Rowan County. I have never encountered people more willing to give of themselves to help others and move their community forward. And I am honored and excited to have an opportunity to contribute to moving us forward in any way that I can.