



WAKE FOREST

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BIG CITY ENERGY, *Small Town Charm*



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Wake Forest, North Carolina is a dynamic and forward-thinking town that is conveniently located in the thriving Research Triangle region. It has recently experienced significant growth and reached a population of over forty thousand residents. There is something truly special about how the town has preserved its heritage throughout the years. Even though it has tripled its growth in the last fifteen years, that small town charm is still alive and well in Wake Forest.

Written by Jen Hocken

Jason Cannon is a vital leader with two professional roles in the economic development of Wake Forest. He is the Economic Development Director for the Town of Wake Forest, and he is also the president of the Wake Forest Business and Industry Partnership, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization formed by the Town to perform its economic development functions.

The organization's role is to generate business interest in the great community of Wake Forest. The economic development team runs a marketing program on the internet and in print to call attention to some of the town's strengths such as its fun, lively communities, job stability, good housing and a rich history.

One key component of the economic development in Wake Forest is the business retention and expansion (BRE) program. The program entails visits with the current businesses in the town to determine how the business community is growing and where it is lacking. "I've yet to have a company that I've met with in my almost twenty months here that isn't growing. We are in an incredibly fortunate environment here," says Jason Cannon.

Due to its rapid growth, part of the challenge is that it is running out of available space for non-residential and non-retail job creation centers. For that reason, the economic development team also focuses on producing new pieces of developable land to increase job creation opportunities and works in partnership with private property owners to acquire a level of control on new properties.

"It is a voluntary option agreement, where we can use the land strategically to draw new employment opportunities, both for companies that are already here and want to grow as well as companies that would like to become a part of the Wake Forest community," says Jason. "It's hard to bring them here if we don't have land." ▶▶

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▶ Due to its presence in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, Wake Forest has many entrepreneurs in its community. The economic development team is launching programs to attract more entrepreneurs and arranging a collaborating group of entrepreneurs allowing for cross-communication to increase the opportunities in the area.

“In terms of entrepreneurialism, we’re bringing together groups of thought leaders that understand what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur because it’s a different animal than other business practices,” says Jason. The entrepreneurs understand why Wake Forest is such a special community and have been giving positive, encouraging feedback in these programs.

The flourishing Research Triangle region is made up of companies, researchers and business supporters that are looking to advance technologies and industries by collaborating. It one of the nation’s fastest-growing regions, second only to San Francisco, and it hopes to shape the future of the

technology sector. Some of the business leaders in Wake Forest include the Wireless Research Center of North Carolina (WRC), Ultra Electronic 3 Phoenix (UE3P) and Superior Tooling.

The Wireless Research Center of North Carolina is an independent, nonprofit research organization with a specialized focus on wireless technology innovation. According to Gerard Hayes, the president and founder of WRC, Wake Forest is a great place for innovation through collaboration. “One of the unique qualities of Wake Forest and North Carolina is the ability to collaborate and cooperate ... with the mayor, the town commissioners as well as the town chamber of commerce – everybody comes together to form an ideal for the community. It is very community-minded and community-centric.”

The town has plans to build its own fiber optic internet network across the town to connect its facilities and allow it to lease the unused fiber in the system to third-party providers. The economic development team has found that high-speed internet connectivity is exceedingly appealing to the entrepreneurial community. Its cutting-edge ambition will provide the high-speed internet and 5G technology that is beginning to roll through the country, and Wake Forest is excited to be at the forefront of the evolution.

Ultra Electronics 3 Phoenix designs anti-submarine sonar processing. John Jamieson, the senior advisor to UE3P chose the Wake Forest location because of its charming atmosphere. “One of the

things I liked about Wake Forest as opposed to other areas ... It’s got the big time, big town features and amenities but still retains that small town feel, and that was kind of a natural fit for me.”

Superior Tooling serves customers across the world, in many industries, with its injection molding and machining services. President and Owner Robbie Earnhardt enjoys life in Wake Forest. “There’s a lot going on in the community ... We have great school systems. We have great government, and it’s a safe area to live in ... The opportunities are the main thing here. We are very fortunate to live in North Carolina, but we have been more fortunate to live in Wake Forest because of the opportunities that surround us.”

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The impact that Wake Forest’s history has had is what makes this a singular place. Back in the 1830s, Dr. Calvin Jones relocated from Massachusetts, and since he was so passionate about education, he purchased the highest point of property in Wake Forest and founded Wake Forest College. The

site of the college overlooked his plantation which has now been turned into a museum which attracts a great deal of tourist traffic.

As a result of the college, a major retail trade area developed close to the Wake Forest College campus. Even the rail line was diverted to run directly by the campus. The college created a great environment for success in the community. “There were historical buildings built up along our main street here called White Street, and it has left a beautiful collection of buildings and old trees. Everything you associate with old and beautiful we have here,” says Jason.

In the 1950s, the town of Wake Forest underwent some drastic changes. R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company was making a lot of money; the Reynolds family wanted to leave a legacy, so they approached the people at Wake Forest College and offered them what is rumored to be hundreds of millions of dollars today to move the college. The Reynolds family moved the Wake Forest College campus to Winston-Salem, North Carolina and its name went with it as one of the conditions of purchase. The family then put forth money to build a campus that was identical to the campus in the town of Wake Forest.

Prior to the departure of Wake Forest College, the Southern Baptist Convention that had developed Wake Forest College had also started the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. When the college left, the Seminary stayed and still operates

every day on the historic campus. “The college today is as beautiful as it ever was; we are blessed with a beautiful historic campus and a downtown attached to it that has been well maintained and preserved. The town has done beautiful streetscaping for a great pedestrian experience,” says Jason. The history of the town attracts new residents to the area and it has also left Wake Forest with something of which they can be proud.

Another popular tourist attraction is the Renaissance Center for the Performing Arts, which the town established several years ago. It features all types of performing arts opportunities throughout the year and has received a positive response and seen incredible growth since its opening.

Another facility, fittingly named The Factory, was privately developed in an old industrial factory, and its incredibly large space has hundreds of thousands of square feet with very high ceilings. It has been renovated into a multi-purpose sports complex that includes ice hockey rinks, football fields, basketball courts, volleyball courts and a multitude of retail stores woven throughout, which is highly convenient for parents waiting for children to play sports.

It draws many visitors to Wake Forest and has even attracted early stages of the U.S. Olympic trials. The population of Wake Forest skews younger with eighty-nine percent of its residents under the age of sixty-five, so there is much interest in youth activities. The Factory has seen plenty of success due to this, and its size can handle the growing population of Wake Forest. The town also has a great park system that pulls in a huge number of people, from both inside and outside the area.

The community is known for its entertaining, engaging activities and events to celebrate and socialize. Once a month, the town’s main street is closed down for a street party from April through October called Friday Night on White. On average, this past season attracted more than 15,000 visitors. There is also an annual, enormous outdoor merchant fair called Meet in the Street, and a concert series called Six Sundays in Spring.

“We host a Good Neighbor Day, which I think is quite charming for a growing community like ours. There’s no other purpose than to come together, serve folks lunch so they can just meet each other and meet new people in the community,” says Jason.

The residential options in Wake Forest are plentiful, and there is a plethora of new development in the area. The town is growing rapidly as it attracts retirees looking for a slower pace of life and young families looking for quality schools in a safe community with a healthy economy. “When you take job stability, good housing and good development controls and add the historic small town charm with infused park systems and downtown events,” Jason explains, “it really is the whole package.”

Although economic development affects many aspects of the community, the Town of Wake Forest prioritizes marketing and business retention, land acquisition and preparing for future growth and entrepreneurialism. The community provides big city services and energy with a small town charm, something that people still value. “People want the ability to unplug and set work aside when it’s time to relax, and in Wake Forest, we are very proud of the ability for people to do that if they want to,” says Jason Cannon. ■





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