



Matt Powell

# HIGH AND MIGHTY

Watauga County's quality of life and entrepreneurial spirit make it one of the state's strongest economies.

**T**he qualities that make Watauga County stand out among North Carolina's 100 counties — its entrepreneurial spirit, dedication to higher education, breathtaking geography and respect for the environment — also make it ideal for economic development. This county of 51,000 residents offers a highly educated workforce, an established community of green-tech experts, advanced medical services and an emphasis on entrepreneurship that is backed by local, state and university resources. Those resources have helped Watauga nurture informa-

tion-technology, logistics, outdoor-equipment and green-industry companies.

Watauga is garnering recognition for its growth and quality of life. *Forbes* magazine recently ranked county seat Boone the fourth-fastest-growing small town in America. *U.S. News & World Report* also recently named Boone one of the 10 best places in the country to retire. It ranks as the sixth-healthiest county in North Carolina, according to the national County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program. *Outside* magazine named Boone one of the 10 best small towns in the U.S. in 2009.

And state travel writers and tourism officials have deemed the village of Blowing Rock the prettiest small town in North Carolina.

The county's economy is strong even during sluggish times. Watauga continues to boast one of North Carolina's lowest unemployment rates — at 8.8% it's below the state average. Higher education adds to the appeal. Appalachian State University, which offers more than 150 undergraduate and graduate majors, is in the heart of Boone, and Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute also has a campus there.

Their presence is one reason Watauga has one of the state's best-educated workforces, with a well-above-average percentage of bachelor's- and advanced-degree holders.

With all these high-elevation rankings, Watauga offers the right kind of lows for business growth as well. It has North Carolina's third-lowest county property-tax rate at 31.3 cents per \$100 valuation, as well as a crime rate nearly half the state average. The friendly business climate and strong public safety have Watauga poised to cultivate a rich soil for business success.

The spirit of past generations of rugged, resourceful mountaineers is alive and well in today's Watauga, where one only has to go as far as the local market to find homegrown business success. ECR Software Corp., based in downtown Boone, has helped lead a renaissance in Main

Street development. Housed in a former auto dealership, ECRS holds exclusive rights to at least one line of self-checkout register software, the machines that allow consumers to easily scan, bag and pay for their groceries at retail outlets across the country. Clients include grocers in San Francisco, Montana and Toronto, as well as beverage companies, breweries, health-product distributors, fuel suppliers and health-care systems.

ECR Software employs about 40 people, most of them computer-science graduates from Appalachian State. "ASU puts out great graduates," says Peter Catoe, founder and CEO. Catoe notes that the company is homegrown in Watauga. "Everything's done here. Revenue generated outside of the county stays in the county."

Similar values form the canvas used by one of Watauga's most artistic

entrepreneurs. In the 1980s, frustrated that quality art supplies for his water-color painting were difficult to buy locally, Boone Drug pharmacist Joe Miller contacted wholesalers and began carrying a small selection at the local drug store. In 1990, his hobby turned into a business when he rented 2,500 square feet of space in the county industrial park. Today Cheap Joe's Art Stuff owns a 40,000-square-foot outlet store in that same park, as well as a thriving online business, another store in Charlotte and a 350-page catalog.

The spirit of entrepreneurship melds nicely with love of the outdoors. Finding a niche among the steady stream of nature lovers, Footsloggers Outdoor & Travel Outfitters has actually thrived in the economic downturn. As Americans reprioritized their budgets, many found it cheaper to hike or ride bikes locally than spend thousands of dollars



on faraway vacations. That provided an opening for Footsloggers to become one of the High Country's leading kayaking-, camping-, climbing- and hiking-equipment suppliers.

General Manager Jason Berry says offering a quality product to a steady customer base of students has helped the company, which has locations in Boone and Blowing Rock, overcome the seasonal

ups and downs so many outdoor retailers face. "The outdoor recreation is wonderful year-round because each season offers different recreation opportunities."

Appalachian State is the county's largest employer and one of its most important sources for research and workers, creating about 5,100 jobs across the High Country for a total economic impact of \$506 million,

according to a 2008 study. "Boone is a university town, but more than most university towns, it is dominated by the university," Todd Cherry, director of the Center for Economic Research & Policy Analysis at ASU, told *Forbes* this year. "Between 2007 and 2010, university enrollment increased by nearly 2,000 students, and [university] employment increased by about 200 people. That's a primary factor in Boone's recent growth."

Such a rapid and stable stream of students — enrollment is roughly 17,000 — means Watauga has access to an educated workforce. And because of the region's recreational resources, many of ASU's 4,000 annual graduates remain nearby. "Many graduating students want to stay here due to quality of life, so they are motivated to find gainful employment," a recent economic-development report states.

The term "green industry" has become a buzzword in economic development, but green technologies have been the linchpin of Watauga's research-and-development goals for 30 years. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts' 2009 Clean Energy Economy report, sustainable employment across North Carolina increased 15.3% from 1998 to 2007. At Appalachian State's Appalachian Energy Center, faculty, students and local business leaders collaborate in four areas of research and energy technology: energy efficiency; renewable energy; alternative fuels; and policy, markets and economic analysis. Founded in 2001, the center has helped green entrepreneurs in solar- and wind-energy production. It has also sponsored regional summits on energy policy and green technology.

The Watauga County Economic Development Commission recently launched the Watauga Green Business Plan to give entrepreneurs tools to help reduce their environmental impact, improve operational efficiency

and enhance their business reputations. Once a local business is certified green, it can see an immediate reduction in costs and enhance its marketing, promotion and community leadership.

Along with abundant access to outdoor recreation, Watauga owes much of its vigor — including its low rates of obesity and chronic disease as ranked by the Watauga County Community Health Assessment — to Appalachian Regional Healthcare System. The county's second-largest employer, it operates Watauga Medical Center, a 117-bed acute-care hospital. It offers a full-service imaging department, including a CT scanner, digital mammography and MRI, along with a full-service emergency department. It features birthing, cardiology, sleep, urgent-care and cancer centers, as well as a joint-replacement program. The system also maintains Love Your Life, an employee health-incentive program.

The environment enhances Watauga's appeal. With its convenient access to Linville Gorge, Grandfather Mountain and the Blue Ridge Parkway, it has hundreds of miles of hiking trails, mountain-bike paths, rapids and climbs to suit all skill levels. In 2012, Watauga County and the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority opened Rocky Knob, a 185-acre park in Boone. The region also sports greenways, outdoor climbing walls, zip lines and three ski resorts.

All of these factors make Watauga a pinnacle experience for outdoor enthusiasts, entrepreneurs and companies of all sizes. "The Europeans who came here had to be resourceful to survive, and we're grateful to live in a place where the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes," Miller of Cheap Joe's says. "What we've done here is far beyond anything I ever dreamed." ■