

Newton: A Tale of Two Counties

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – April 29, 2012

“Our Thoughts” last Sunday raised an interesting question: Is Newton County part of Metro Atlanta? For the Editorial Board of the *Covington News*, commenting on reporting of the Baxter International announcement, the answer was a resounding “no.” But, as far as the rest of Georgia is concerned, “it depends.”

For statewide planning and coordination, Georgia divides its 159 counties into 12 regional commissions. Newton is not in the 10-county Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC); we are one of 12 counties making up the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC). But, the area west of Georgia Highway 36 is included in the Atlanta Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). MPOs are federally mandated organizations existing since 1962 to coordinate transportation policy among local governments in urbanized areas. Thanks to rampant population growth in the 1990s and 2000s, western Newton County is an urbanized area considered part of metro Atlanta.

By now, you’re asking “why should I care?” For one thing, straddling the line between two distinctly different regions is challenging for local leaders trying to ensure Newton County gets visibility for policy making, project prioritization, and allocation of funds. In the Atlanta MPO we rank 16th of 20 counties in population, placing us well off the radar for a region of 5.3 million people. By contrast, in the Northeast Georgia Region, we account for more than 1/6th of the people (100,000 out of 584,000). But, except for Athens-Clarke County and other Atlanta fringe counties like Walton and Barrow, our region consists of sparsely populated, largely agricultural communities.

Newton today is a tale of two counties, and split personalities make it difficult to collaborate within our borders. The quality of life concerns for someone living in a subdivision in Oak Hill are very different from those of a family living on a farm in Mansfield or Newborn. Just as they vary between a retired couple living on Jackson Lake and a young, single professional living in a loft in Covington or Porterdale. Yet, we are one county.

Those with local roots going back generations – or who married into that legacy as I did – feel a strong connection to this place, the land, and its heritage. If you live as I do in downtown Covington, there are emotional and physical ties to the Square, the tree-lined avenues, antebellum homes, and historic neighborhoods. But, ties only stretch so far. Ask a first-generation newcomer in the western end of the county where he or she lives, and the answer may well be “Metro Atlanta.”

Again, you ask “why should I care?” Because those same folks work, shop, dine, and play in Metro Atlanta. Sales tax dollars and job-creating spending go elsewhere, while property taxes alone can’t pay for schools, streets, and public safety. Lest you think that doesn’t matter, recent census data shows households in the western half of the county have the highest average incomes and education levels.

That brings us to the big news last week that Baxter International will bring a \$1 billion manufacturing center and 1,500 jobs to the Stanton Springs industrial park in eastern Newton County. This is a fantastic coup and a much needed boost to our local economy. In a county suffering with higher unemployment than most and an unbalanced tax base, there could hardly be better news. Kudos to the Chamber of Commerce, the Joint Development Authority, and elected officials past and present who all played a role.

Baxter’s investment here will have a huge positive impact. But, to make this a turning point toward an even brighter future requires we do more now than celebrate. With high-paying jobs comes greater disposable income. We hope those jobs go to people living in Newton County, and we need them to spend that income playing, dining, and shopping in Newton County. Stanton Springs has a proximity to Madison and Lake Oconee not unlike the relationship of western Newton County to Metro Atlanta. We have wonderful natural and cultural resources that make Newton County special to us, but we must do more if we are to spread that same appreciation to our new friends and neighbors.

Our current situation comes from over a decade of “anything goes” in the western half of the county, followed by a “Katie, bar the door” reaction to development of the eastern half. The 2050 Plan offers a blueprint for a more thoughtful, sustainable way to coexist... and prosper. But, that’s a topic for another day. For now, just know it matters where we go from here.