



Cane Creek Park is popular among Union County residents and visitors for its camping, fishing, hiking and picnicking facilities.

REGIONAL REPORT: UNION COUNTY

UNION COUNTY MIXES IT UP

Touted as a hub for economic diversity in the state, Union County nurtures strong industrial, agricultural and regional sectors.

From agribusiness to precision manufacturing, recreation to retail, Union County is banking on its diverse economic base to foster prosperity in a region long dominated by Charlotte.

Despite its diversity, Union County has created a name for itself as a hub for the aerospace industry. North Carolina is home to a total of 70 aerospace-specific manufacturing facilities.

PROVIDED BY UNION COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Last year, PricewaterhouseCoopers ranked the “First in Flight” state No. 4 in the United States for Aerospace Manufacturing Attractiveness. Nowhere in North Carolina is this economic sector more concentrated as in Union County, where 23 companies support the aerospace industry.

That this industry has experienced a growth spurt in Union County over the last 16 years is no accident but rather a result of a targeted recruitment strategy focused on aerospace companies, according to Chris Platé, executive director of the Monroe-Union County Economic Development Commission.

“Back in February 2002, we were trying to figure out how to create an industrial cluster,” he says. “We had a very good, diverse industrial mix already and were metals and machine-building focused, so it made sense to try to figure out a way to go after something that was based in machine building.”

Many North Carolina counties and regions were focused on automotive machinery, an industry that had been migrating farther south. Instead of trying to get ahead of the automotive curve, Platé and his team decided to go after the aerospace market.

“9/11 had just happened, so everybody was pulling out of aerospace at that point, and that industry disappeared for a little bit,” he says. “We had three base companies at the time that were aerospace, and we told the Monroe City Council that we were going to go after this industry for multiple reasons, one of them being long-term strategy.”

Platé is convinced the council looked at him as if he were crazy, but his team landed its first aerospace project in late 2002.

“It was Caledonian Alloys,” he said. “After that, in 2004, we got Goodrich UTC Aerospace Systems, and that was the stamp of approval. The floodgates opened up.”



South Piedmont Community College President Maria Pharr says her institution will soon be working with Wingate University, above, to move students seamlessly from community college to a four-year university.

Today, Union County is among the top 10 aerospace clusters in the Southeast, representing more than \$800 million in tax base and employing 4,500 people, or 26% of Monroe’s manufacturing workforce, according to Platé.

“Virtually every commercial plane flying in the world today has parts on them from Monroe and Union County,” he says.

This cluster has improved wages in Union County. “Around 1999, the average manufacturing wage was between \$9 and \$11 per hour, and today it’s \$18.62,” he says. “Aerospace is largely responsible for pushing that, and now all of our industries are paying more.”

Allegheny Technologies Inc., located in Union County since 1957, is a giant in the aerospace industry and the cornerstone of this sector, Platé adds.

“ATI has always been in high-end metals and they have continually reinvented themselves to stay relevant,” he says. “Through research and development, they make some of the best metals in the world. They have been a leader in this community for a long time, pay well and offer continuous employee training and retraining.”

Reflecting the county’s leadership in air service and paving the way for a global presence, Monroe’s municipal airport is the only general aviation airport between Atlanta and Washington, D.C., with a customs office for private jets, Platé says.

“You can fly into Monroe and go through customs here without having to go somewhere else to clear customs,” he says. “It’s a great differentiator and establishes Monroe as a direct entry point into the United States.”

Establishing the local airport as a customs office was not without its hurdles.

“It was a fascinating process to go through. It took six years,” he says. The effort started in 2008 and received the customs clearance in 2014.

Union County’s reputation for aviation extends to the celebrated Warbirds Over Monroe Air Show, now in its 11th year. The city of Monroe owns the star of the show, the beloved Tinker Belle, a restored C-46 Commando, and the only military painted C-46 currently flying in the United States. No other city in the world has its own operational warbird aircraft, according to Pete

TINKER BELLE DELIGHTS UNION COUNTY AIR SHOW

In the city of Monroe, Tinker Belle serves a special brand of magic, conjuring up a major tourism event on Veterans Day weekends and putting Union County on the map.

A vintage Curtiss-Wright C-46 Commando transport plane, the Tinker Belle flaunts 11 camels painted beneath its name, each representing a successful trip hauling cargo over the humps of the Himalayan Mountains from China to Burma. The 1946 aircraft was built in Buffalo, N.Y., according to Pete Hovanec, executive director of the city of Monroe Tourism Department.

Volunteers with the Monroe Warriors and Warbirds nonprofit organization rescued Tinker Belle from moldering in a Texas storage facility and restored it to flying shape in 2011. Its moniker is derived from its home at Tinker Air Force Base. Warriors and Warbirds made it the feature attraction in its annual Warbirds Air Show, which it started in 2005 to honor war veterans.

The air show has blossomed, eventually growing so large the Warriors and Warbirds organization could not sustain the workload. So the celebration, along with Tinker Belle, was turned over to

the city, and now Monroe is the only city in the world that owns a World War II vintage airplane that can still fly, according to Hovanec.

"Now we have 40 World War II-era aircraft at the show, and it is recognized as the largest nonmilitary air show on the East Coast," he says. He estimates the show attracts about 85,000 spectators each year.

The Tinker Belle is housed at Charlotte-Monroe Executive Airport and travels up and down the East Coast, making appearances at air shows and serving as a unique marketing tool.

The two-day show is a combination of education, celebration and family-friendly fun, lasting about five hours each day.

"The planes are the performers," Hovanec says. "They fly in precision formations, do acrobatics, aerial comedy skits, feature wing walkers and perform stunts like landing on flatbed trucks."

The show dovetails with Union County's aerospace cluster.

"Tinker Belle certainly is something different, and she sets us apart," he says. "There's no other plane like Tinker Belle flying in the United States." ■

Hovanec, director of the Monroe Tourism Department.

"The Warbirds and Warriors nonprofit organization started the air show as a vintage aircraft fly-in, and it evolved into a small air show with 10 to 15 planes," Hovanec says. "Today, we usually have around 40 World War II-era aircraft at the show, which is recognized as the largest nonmilitary air show on the East Coast."

The event outgrew the nonprofit's ability to manage it, so the city took over. Estimates place attendance at around 85,000 for the two-day event, most coming from about a 60-mile radius of Union County.

Other sites attracting visitors include the new Center Theatre in downtown Monroe, a vintage movie house that the city purchased and converted into a performing-arts center. Cane Creek Park in Waxhaw attracts outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy fishing, camping and horseback riding. Extreme Ice Center in Indian Trail is a training mecca for hockey players and Olympic ice-skating hopefuls as well as a popular spot for amateur skaters. The area is also home to a large equine population.

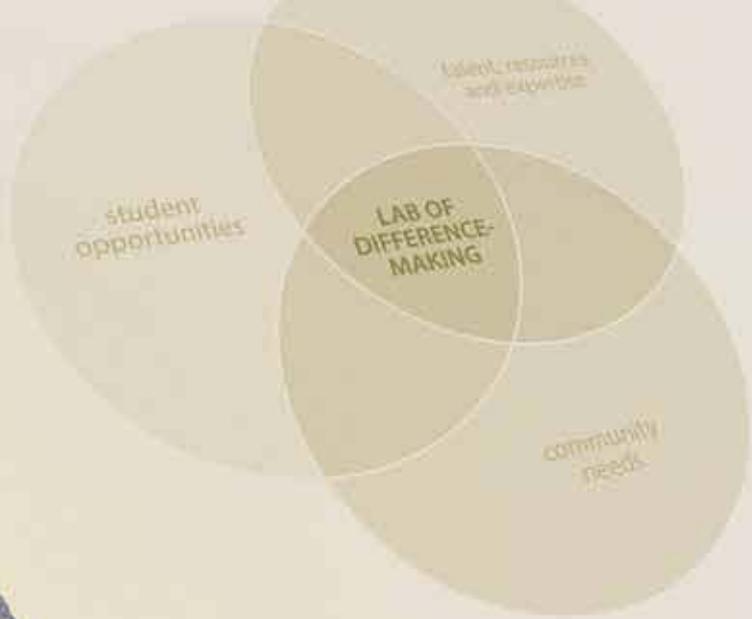
"Our county is fortunate to have such diversity," says Pat Kahle, executive director of the Union County Chamber of Commerce. "We're centrally located just a few hours from the mountains and the beach, and minutes away from NFL football, NBA basketball and other sports."

With more than 700 members, the chamber is the voice of the business community, with small businesses making up roughly 50% of its membership. The chamber website lists 26 different categories of profit and nonprofit businesses from multiple sectors.

"Because our membership is made up of different sectors from retail to manufacturing, arts to automotive, we bring value to them by focusing on their common needs," Kahle says.



The Monroe air show attracts about 85,000 spectators each year.



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REGIONAL REPORT: UNION COUNTY

“Advocacy and public policy, workforce development, environmental friendliness, and helping businesses stay connected to each other and their customers are among the services we provide.”

Kahle has seen the chamber’s membership grow by 25% since she was named executive director in 2013. With 14 municipalities spread over Union County’s 640 square miles, the county is home to 231,366 residents, according to 2017 census data.

Because of their close proximity to Charlotte, many residents in the affluent towns of Weddington and Marvin enjoy the quality of life in Union County but commute to Charlotte. The residential center makes up 83% of the county’s property tax base.

The chamber and the economic development commission want to

develop more commercial zoning in these residential areas to create opportunities for residents to live, work, shop and dine in Union County and create a more level tax base.

“We are seeking balance,” Platé says. “Manufacturing subsidizes property taxes for every home in Union County by about \$500 per home.”

Platé would like to see more office buildings in the western part of the county, attracting restaurants and shops that would keep workers in the county.

“There’s a built-in workforce there; we just need to turn those cars around,” he said, and he is banking on a new expressway to create more opportunities for commercial zoning and growth in the western communities.

The new U.S. 74, which will be a tolled expressway, is scheduled to

open this November. Platé points to the thoroughfare as a way to cultivate an up-and-coming logistics sector.

Five years ago, the Union County Economic Development Commission merged with the Monroe Economic Development Commission. The county already has a 150-acre industrial park and is working on developing another one. Industrial growth sectors include pharmaceutical plastics, digital printing, data centers and food processing.

“Our goal is to have 1,700 acres of industrial development, but we have to be careful,” he says. “We’ve maintained a low unemployment rate for the last 18 or 19 years, and we don’t have a lot of bodies.”

The N.C. Department of Commerce reports the unemployment rate in Union County was 3.6% last July.

For workforce development, Platé considers South Piedmont Community College one of the commission’s best partners and the county’s top incentive for attracting business and industry. In fact, SPCC shares office space with the commission in Monroe.

SPCC is North Carolina’s newest community college, formed in 1999 through the combination of Anson Community College and Union Technical Education Center. The majority of the college’s 9,750 students come from Union County.

Platé touts the college’s new apprenticeship program, which serves seven corporate partners in Union County and is a source of pride for college President Maria Pharr.

Pharr, who sits on the boards of both the economic development commission and Union County Chamber of Commerce, views SPCC as an agent for workforce development.

“Our main focus is the needs of the counties we serve,” she says.

SPCC’s Pathways Consortium, made up of industrial, manufac-



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Short term training options	Two-year options
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced Manufacturing & Mechatronics • Machining • Industrial Maintenance • Electrical/Electronics • Solar and Wind Technology • Air Conditioning, Heating, & Refrigeration • Welding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industrial Systems • Mechanical Engineering • Mechatronics Engineering • Air Conditioning, Heating & Refrigeration • Electrical Systems

spcc.edu

turing and technology companies that offer paid apprenticeships, on-the-job training and classroom work, also provide opportunities for students to earn prestigious, industry-recognized credentials in a variety of fields.

Greiner Bio-One, a Monroe-based medical technology manufacturing company, has offered apprenticeships through SPCC for seven years. That effort expanded into an official apprenticeship program last year. Currently, five companies partner with SPCC to offer apprenticeships, with more growth on the horizon.

"We want to grow the program to include health care and other sectors," Pharr says. "It takes time to build relationships with companies interested in offering apprenticeships, but the program is starting to build momentum."

The apprenticeships often lead to permanent jobs. Greiner Bio-One has hired 12 of the 14 apprentices who have passed through the program.

"Our goal is to serve a local workforce and keep them here," Pharr says.

That goal is paying off in economic impact. According to a report SPCC released last year, the impact of former students currently employed in the regional workforce amounted to \$61.7 million in added income during 2016-17.

Union County touts a variety of economic-development superlatives, including a 2015 designation by Smart-Asset as No. 1 in the state for incoming investment and economic growth. Platé credits the county's diverse economic base as one of the reasons.

Agriculture also plays a big role in the economy. The county's top employer is Tyson Foods, with more than 1,500

employees. Two years ago, Tyson added a \$56 million expansion to its Monroe chicken-processing plant.

"We are in the top 10 in almost every commodity," said Platé. "Our agriculture crescent is small, but it produces more commodity than most of the counties in North Carolina."

The western region closest to Charlotte includes high pockets of value, income and population density. The central region has its strong precision manufacturing base. Agriculture is king in the eastern portion of the county.

Platé believes his county is a mirror of North Carolina's economy.

"Union County is home to as much diversity in one county as there is in the entire state," he says. ■

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from Raleigh.

AMERICAN Bank & Trust Proposed

The organizers of American Bank & Trust (proposed) are excited to announce plans to bring community banking back to the Monroe/ Union County area. Our mission is straight-forward: local ownership, local decision making and local bankers providing superior customer service to our community. Unlike many banks operating in the Union County market, our primary measurement of success will not be rapid growth, but rather the long-term relationships we cultivate with our clients. We intend to develop and direct well-capitalized, well-managed bank built around key financial fundamentals balanced with strategic growth.

American Bank & Trust (proposed) is organizing under the laws of the State of North Carolina to engage in a full-service commercial and consumer banking business out of its initial offices to be located in the City of Monroe, Union County, North Carolina. Organization of the proposed bank depends upon approval of its charter by both the North Carolina Commissioner of Banks and the North Carolina Banking Commission and approval of its application for federal deposit insurance by the FDIC.

FIND OUT MORE! To learn more about American Bank & Trust (proposed), including a brief overview of our business plan and how to purchase stock, please call 704-996-5011 or 704-968-1866. Or, you may email radcock@abtnc.onmicrosoft.com or jharris@abtnc.onmicrosoft.com.



The Management Team for American Bank & Trust (proposed) includes: (back, l to r) Market Executive Steve Barnes, Market Executive Frank Aikmus, Chief Credit Officer Phil Presson, (front) Chief Financial Officer Jennifer Harris and President and Chief Executive Officer Randy Adcock.

COMMON STOCK*

Purchase Price \$11.00 Per Share

2,000,000 Shares

(Aggregate Minimum)

Minimum Purchase: 500 Shares

2,400,000 Shares

(Aggregate Maximum)

Maximum Purchase: 100,000 Shares **

*Pre-Incorporation Subscriptions

** (or 5% of the aggregate number of shares sold, whichever is greater)