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**TOWN NO LONGER SOLD ON RETAIL DEVELOPMENT;
PINEVILLE NOW WANTS MORE RESIDENTS, MORE SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES**

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Pineville is having a midlife crisis. At the ripe age of 151 years old.

Saturated with more than 6 million square feet of retail, this south Mecklenburg County town is trying to remake itself.

"We have bitten off more than we can chew," said Mayor George Fowler. "And we realized, for the benefit of the town, we couldn't keep going that way."

Fearing more traffic congestion and added strain on police resources, the town council twice this year has turned down large retail developments - and says what it would really like is for some folks to come build single-family houses.

It's quite a turnaround for the 5-square-mile town, long known as the city that never said no to new shopping as it emerged as the hub of southern Mecklenburg retail. Altogether, Pineville has roughly one-sixth of Mecklenburg's more than 35 million square feet of retail stores.

Now, town officials say it's time to stop as they seek to reduce the scale of development. In addition to curbing town costs and making the town more attractive to new residents, slowing retail growth, planners say, would help ease the competition among retailers.

The plethora of shopping centers suits Pineville resident Janice Long just fine - to an extent.

"I like the convenience of it, but I don't like the traffic," she said. "I don't go out on weekends if I can help it."

Compared with the rapid growth all around it, Pineville's population grew by just 16 percent during the '90s, from 2,970 to 3,449.

Pineville, settled by Scots-Irish immigrants more than 250 years ago, got its name in 1852 and was incorporated in 1873, said Joe Griffin Sr., the town's unofficial historian. The town began as a farm community and remained so until the late 1890s, when what is known today as Cone Mill was built.

Looking toward the future, town leaders say they want to create more single-family homes - and larger ones - to drive up the population. Nearly three-quarters of the housing is multifamily.

In two years, Fowler says, he wants the number of single-family houses to double, for a total of 1,600. Pineville has more than 500 acres available for residential development. About 750 townhomes or single-family homes have been approved by the city or are under construction.

Zoning administrator and planner David Barley said town officials are talking with a local company, Cambridge Partners, about a project that would include housing, office and retail uses near Carolina Place Mall. The planning staff expects to receive an application for the project this summer.

Planning started late

But some people question whether it's too late for Pineville to start paying attention to building its residential base. Most cities start with housing, then pursue retail to strengthen the tax base.

Bill McCoy, former director of UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute, said Pineville will have a tough time attracting homeowners, who crave peace and less congestion.

"It's sort of hard to find that in Pineville," he said. "It seems to me that every road down there is overwhelmed."

Four years ago, Pineville hired Mike Rose, the town's first full-time planner, to create a vision and a land-use plan. The plan's goals include identifying areas for future residential growth, encouraging retail and residential infill development, and reducing congestion.

But when Rose came on board, the retail boom was already in full swing. It was spurred by the promise of the Interstate 485 outerbelt, the widening of N.C. 51 and the opening of Pineville's Carolina Place Mall in 1991, said Charlotte real estate analyst Frank Warren, president of Warren Associates.

"Once the mall opened, that created the regional draw, and their dominance in the marketplace has accelerated," Warren said.

Too fast, too soon

Mayor Pro Tem Kenny Mills said he realized difficult days were ahead for Pineville when the mall opened.

"I knew then we were in trouble," he said. "I could see the handwriting on the wall."

But town leaders admit they weren't savvy enough and didn't have the tools to deal with all the growth that came their way. Last year, the town council changed the zoning laws to have better control over large-scale development.

"When you look at something and you see that a large development wants to be in your town you see the tax values surrounding that (and) I think the tendency is to think this is really going to give us a solid foundation," Fowler said.

"But you don't realize at that particular point the impact it's going to have on the services you have to provide."

And approving Wal-Mart, which the town was asked to do in March, they say, would have buried the town even further. It was determined that the 24-hour-a-day operation, which would have been located off U.S. 421 near I-485, would not generate enough money to offset the additional police resources. A tax hike - on top of the 9-cent property tax increase passed last year - would have become a possibility.

More police officers would have been needed, too. Today, 96 percent of the police calls come from commercial properties. And the \$2.2 million it costs to operate the force is neck-and-neck with the \$2.3 million in property taxes the town is expecting to rake in this year.

Fowler said Wal-Mart would have put the town in a peculiar spot. Town officials said at least two police officers would've been needed to monitor the store and respond to calls. The price tag: more than \$120,000.

"That would have been the straw that broke the camel's back," Fowler said.

Wal-Mart representatives, however, said the store would use its own security guards and cameras. And an attorney representing the retail giant has said the store would generate at least \$100,000 in sales, property and other taxes and fees for the town.

Daphne Moore, community affairs manager with Wal-Mart, said the store would have been an economic boon for Pineville.

"We pay more than our fair share," she said.

Town officials said they welcome mixed-use development at the site where Wal-Mart wanted to locate. But large commercial development? Forget about it.

"We can't take any more," Mills said.

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