

# Town of Erwin

## Profile

Erwin, population 4,812, is located on the Cape Fear River in a cotton-growing region of eastern Harnett County. And it was a product of cotton that for many years gave Erwin its identity.

The town grew up around the Erwin Cotton Mill. Later owned by Burlington Industries and then Swift Denim, the plant became the town's largest employer (at its height providing 3,000 jobs), its largest utility customer, largest taxpayer and largest corporate partner. The mill and the wages it paid drove downtown business. Proud of the connection, the town dubbed itself the Denim Capital of the World. In 2001, however, Swift Denim shut its doors, throwing 1,000 people out of work and costing the town one-third of its revenue.

Four years later, Erwin suffered another blow. Its second largest employer, Good Hope Hospital, also closed.

For Erwin, overreliance on a single industry (or even two) has been a hard-earned lesson. Lost revenues forced a reduction in some town services. To make further adjustments, Erwin consolidated its utilities with Harnett County. The consolidation has a definite upside. As part of the consolidation agreement, the county will extend lines along the U.S. 421 commercial corridor to encourage new development.

Silence continues to reign over most of the old mill property, but Erwin's annual Denim Days festival continues. And in one mill building, new life is taking hold. A manufacturer of pools and spas has moved in and now employs about 100 people.

## Community Issues

The losses of Swift Denim and Good Hope Hospital have left Erwin with a huge economic hole. In tier 2 Harnett County, recovery will be challenging. The county poverty rate now stands at 17 percent. Although a current figure for the town is not available, even before the plant closure it was nearly 21 percent. Furthermore, in Erwin a third of the population older than 25 lacks a high school education.

## Opportunities

Without its two largest employers, Erwin is a town in search of identity and direction. It will try to find both through NC STEP. And it has reason for optimism. Situated between Wake and Cumberland counties, Harnett is the eighth fastest-growing county in the state. Planned expansion of Fort Bragg could bring more growth soon. Development of a kayak and canoe park on the Cape Fear River could tap into the ecotourism market, and efforts are under way to locate a mental health care facility in the former Good Hope Hospital.

## Contact

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