

Town of Old Fort

Profile

Old Fort cherishes its history. Arrowhead Monument honors the Cherokee and Catawba who hunted these lands. Outside of town, volunteers are raising a log palisade to re-create a Revolutionary War fort that once stood here. The Mountain Gateway Museum and a railroad museum, located in the old town depot, recall more recent history.

The town, population 963, was incorporated in 1872. It has always been a modest community of hard-working people. For years, most folks made their living on small farms. Over time, a tannery, timber and textiles provided other alternatives, but lately the options seem to be shrinking. The Old Fort Finishing Plant once provided 500 jobs. It closed in 1984. A more recent closure, of the town's largest water customer, has left it struggling to pay off the construction bonds.

A scenic area off the Blue Ridge Parkway, Old Fort and surrounding McDowell County are attracting some second-home development. Mill Creek and the Catawba River flow through Old Fort, adding to the beauty and to recreational options, and Lake James State Park is nearby. For entertainment, there's Old Fort Mountain Music, playing every Friday night, just as it has for over 20 years.

The Old Fort Mountain Heritage Alliance formed in 2006 to help the town boost its social, historical, cultural and economic benefits. Initial efforts focused on a downtown park, which is getting a new clock, lighting and landscaping. Sidewalk improvements may follow.

Community Issues

Located in tier one McDowell County, Old Fort suffers from high rates of unemployment, poverty, divorce, child abuse and school dropouts. Sometimes it seems, prosperity is passing it by, on Interstate 40. Approximately 32,000 vehicles a day travel I-40 past Old Fort. Another 4,200 come right through town in U.S. 70. Few stop.

The town has little to draw them in. Even locals drive over to Black Mountain, Marion or Asheville for most shopping. The few local options are hampered by limited parking. Norfolk Southern Railroad – with two full sets of tracks, plus three storage tracks – takes up most of the downtown land, and crossing the tracks creates safety concerns.

Opportunities

Old Fort joins NC STEP's High Country Cluster, which also includes West Jefferson, Todd, Bakersville and Crossnore. Its ultimate goal in STEP is sustainable job creation, probably involving heritage tourism, arts and crafts, and/or second home development. Among the tools it expects to employ are leadership development, entrepreneurship development, building reuse and brownfields development.

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