

Town of Rowland

Profile

Rowland nudges up against the South Carolina border down in southwestern Robeson County. Before the Civil War, that proximity helped build a substantial population of free blacks, many of whom had fled South Carolina's more restrictive laws. Today Rowland, population 1,156, is a majority minority town: 70 percent of its residents are black. The American Indian presence also is strong here; Robeson is the center of the Lumbee homeland.

The coming of the railroad in 1888 helped focus the community, leading to incorporation the following year and making Rowland the center of the local cotton trade. For a time, progress prevailed. Rowland opened the first public library in the county in 1935. But the railroad's decline dealt a lasting blow to the town, despite its proximity to the new means of north-south transportation, U.S. 301 and Interstate 95. The blow was only temporarily relieved by the growth of apparel manufacturing. Factory closings have thrown thousands of Robeson residents out of work over the last decade.

Rowland is far from giving up, however. In 2004 the annual Leadership Rowland Seminar was launched to develop a new generation of leaders. The town also sent two representatives to a small towns leadership program at nearby UNC-Pembroke, and it started a strategic planning process in 2007.

Two Main Street buildings have been renovated to provide quarters for the library and senior center. The historic library building also has been renovated and gained a new purpose as the home of the Rowland Chamber of Commerce. The opening of three new retail businesses and a health service agency bring further encouragement. Meanwhile, redevelopment awaits the 20,000-square-foot Jones Building, recently purchased by the Robeson County Community Development Corp.

Community Issues

Rowland's economy has been shackled for many years by forces beyond its control: the economic restructuring that has shuttered apparel factories and the winds and drought that damaged agricultural crops. Foreclosures on homes and farms are common. The median household income (\$18,021) is less than half the state median and lower even than the state per capita income. One person in three lives in poverty. The Town of Rowland faces as many challenges as does its residents. Basic infrastructure is outdated, and the fund balance has dropped to an all-low low as costs exceed revenues. In tier one Robeson County, where economic distress is widespread and longstanding, revitalization will be especially challenging.

Opportunities

Rowland remains committed to improving its economy and sees potential in an estimated 6,000 travelers who pass through town every day. Capturing some of those, and the dollars they represent, could fuel the beginnings of a renaissance. But first, Rowland needs a broad leadership base to fashion a plan and mobilize support. Through NC STEP, it will recruit and nurture those leaders – purposefully including women, minorities and young people – to prepare them for decision-making roles. From there, it will seek to build an entrepreneurial base for economic renewal and engage young people in community endeavors for long-term sustainability.

Contact

Janet Kelly, Town Clerk
P.O. Box 127
Rowland, NC 28383
910-422-3333
janetkelly@carolina.net

