

Catawba County Lures Both Tradition and Technology

by [Nick Zulovich](#) | Jul. 24, 2009 in



During the past 60 days, Catawba County officials showed that cultivating a long-standing industrial stalwart and welcoming a cutting-edge technology provider both were well within their capabilities.

First in early June, furniture manufacturer Ethan Allen decided to expand its operation in Maiden, creating more than 300 jobs and investing close to \$3 million during the next three years. Then soon after Independence Day, Catawba County leaders approved incentive and infrastructure measures for Apple to create a \$1 billion data center, also in Maiden.

"That's astounding for a town of 3,300 people," said Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County Economic Development Corp. "Clearly, they're both great projects."

The expansion at Ethan Allen aligns with the development strategy that brought Millar to Catawba County from the NC Department of Commerce 15 years ago. Millar's initial role was to consult with existing industry and find ways to make their expansion plans a reality.

"This community has had a long-standing commitment to making sure that those here in the community and have been here for many years are well taken care of," Millar said.



[Listen to a *North Carolina Magazine* special audio feature](#)

The Ethan Allen expansion brings back 143 jobs that were previously lost within the county. An additional 159 positions are planned with an average annual wage that is more than \$5,000 more than usually found in Catawba County.

While the furniture industry in this part of North Carolina has been well established for decades, it's the development of what Millar called the Western North Carolina Technology Corridor that eventually led to the Apple investment.

In August 2006, the Catawba County EDC officially commenced a concerted effort to land data center developments. The organization created a business park specifically for this kind of infrastructure. It also joined data center industry organizations to further show its recruiting commitment.

Early this year, Millar and other county officials began to recruit Apple in earnest. The efforts paid off handsomely.

"The effort to recruit new opportunities to diversify our economy is terribly important because we do realize the economy is changing," Millar said. "We were trying to find opportunities within new sectors. Certainly information technology and data centers specifically showed up on our radar screen as opportunities."

"We developed an industrial park that was specifically targeted to serve the needs of that sector, the data center sector," Millar continued. "We thought it would particularly suit data centers because of the redundant power, water, fiber optic systems and those sorts of things that were in the capacity that a data center would require. We thought it would be developed for multiple users. We certainly didn't think the grand-slam user was going to come along take the entire property, but Apple did."

News about the Apple investment put Catawba County on the minds of developers worldwide. Millar said he's recently received e-mails from Italy and China inquiring about the county. He added that several other economic development projects have started to blossom because of Apple coming to Maiden.

"Certainly I've gotten a lot of new friends as a result of the Apple project," Millar said.

The Apple announcement comes after Google put together a similar project in another North Carolina furniture stronghold. Google constructed its data center in nearby Lenoir in Caldwell County because of some of the same reasons Catawba County lured Apple.

However, Millar stressed that Catawba County is far from finished in the technology development arena. He noted a shell building consisting of 200,000 square feet and ready-to-fit utility hookups is ready for a tenant with complementary incentives to entice further investment.

"We're trying to continue that focus to make sure North Carolina gets its name out as a technology opportunity," Millar concluded.