

# North Carolina Economy Moves From Textiles to Tech

By Jonathan Serrie

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The foothills of North Carolina are famous for furniture and textiles. But as jobs in those industries moved overseas, local leaders worried about too many closed factories and skyrocketing unemployment.

“We have been as high this year as 17.9 percent,” said Tom Johnson of the Economic Development Commission of North Carolina’s Rutherford County. “A lot of that, of course, is attributable to textile operations closing.”

So, Rutherford County, and other small communities in the foothills of North Carolina, banked on a high-tech future. They started luring companies such as Apple, Google and Facebook to build massive computer data centers. Such facilities require plenty of electricity and extensive cooling systems.

With the region’s history of manufacturing, much of the power and water infrastructure is already in place. In fact, Facebook is building a new data farm right on the property of an old textile mill near Forest City, N.C.

“What we recognized in North Carolina is that it has an abundance of power,” said Peter Marin, president of T5 Partners, a company that develops data centers. “It has nuclear power. It has a pro-business environment.”

Marin said generous tax incentives are another big factor in attracting the expensive facilities to North Carolina.

The region is now aggressively marketing itself as a “Data Center Corridor.”

“The opportunity that these facilities are providing goes long beyond just the taxable opportunities,” said Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County Economic Development Corporation. “But the taxes aren’t bad by themselves.”

Economic development officials predict the data centers will create jobs, albeit indirectly.

“A typical data center may have 35 or 40 or 45 jobs, whereas a textile company may have 450 or 500 jobs,” said Rutherford County’s Tom Johnson. “There’s a huge difference in the employment. But there’s also a huge difference in the investment level. Facebook was announced at \$450 million.”

Johnson said that level of investment has already created construction jobs and is likely to create new opportunities for support industries and related employment in a region that is hungry for work.

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