

Careful Planning Remedy for Growing Pains

Baldwin County's population increase is expected, especially considering the county's attractions. However, what local school officials have found is that most of the newcomers bring teenagers, not kindergartners.

BY JIM DUNN

PHOTOS BY CAROLINE BAIRD SUMMERS

Growing areas like Baldwin County have lots of requirements to keep growing, from infrastructure improvements to new housing to more recreational facilities. But it could easily be argued that one factor that trumps all those needs is education. The hottest properties on the planet won't stay that way long if new residents can't find a good school for their children and local business can't find an educated labor pool.

With a student population of 25,000 that grows by some 600 to 800 students per year, an annual budget of \$250 million and \$85

million in new construction scheduled in the next three years, the Baldwin County Public School System is making sure local schools get all the funding and room to grow they need.

Dr. Faron Hollinger is the school system superintendent. He knows firsthand how much the county is changing due to population growth. "What I have seen is a rapid movement from a rural to a highly suburban school district, and in fact, there are certain trends now, particularly in some of our larger municipalities, that even suggest we may be moving from a suburban to a more

urbanized-type of school district, at least in some areas."

That kind of change requires robust steps to handle, and those steps are indeed taking place. The system is currently building its 45th campus, and there are plans for new schools throughout the county. Hollinger says, "We're looking at a new high school under construction in Spanish Fort, a new middle school in Bay Minette, a new school in Foley, a new school in Fairhope, extensive renovations to some of our other facilities."

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the county also is looking at creating a school that will help educate tomorrow's high-tech leaders. "One of the really exciting components we have is that we're looking at a technology magnet high school," Hollinger says. "We don't know where that's going to be located at present, but we're looking at more of a magnet school-type program that will be accessible by all students in Baldwin County....It will have a high-tech emphasis that will prepare youngsters for not only the world of work following high school, but will also be a college-prep experience for those kids who want to go on into, say engineering at Georgia Tech or MIT."

Hollinger says staying on top of education facility needs is harder than providing other types of government services. "If you look at other growth issues — hospitals, shopping centers, utilities — all you need to know is where development is. Schools are considerably different, because you need to know something about the age youngster

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— DR. FARON HOLLINGER, BALDWIN COUNTY SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT

that's going to be there. If you're not careful, you'll build an elementary school where you needed a middle or high school, or vice versa."

According to Hollinger, analysis of demographic data shows that Baldwin County isn't experiencing the usual type of student growth. "What we're seeing is an aging of the population. The median age is climbing, so the people who are moving into Baldwin County, the vast majority of them do not have young, elementary-age children. Our growth is in the middle and high schools."

Hollinger believes the reason for that unusual expansion can be found in the county's real estate. "There are very few starter homes in Baldwin County," he says. "People live other places, and maybe as their income grows, particularly in Mobile, people say, 'I'd like to relocate in say the Eastern Shore or someplace in Baldwin

County."

The influx of new residents into the county means problems dealing with, and planning for, an increased population, but those new residents also generate new revenue for the county, Hollinger says. "We're indeed blessed in terms of our revenue. But, by the same token, that doesn't mean that you don't need to be very judicious and plan what you need to do."

One of the ways the county is able to maintain a 2.5-month operation balance of

\$22 million is the help of the more than 500 business partners. "That has been a very, very positive relationship for us, and I certainly hope it has been for the business partner," Hollinger says. "They are assigned to a certain school, certain components within an area, and they just partner and work with that school to provide enrichment resources, to partner with them on special projects. They work with community foundations many times."

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