



Sponsored County Focus: Cheatham County

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The best-kept secret in Middle Tennessee

The wide part of the Cumberland River known as Cheatham Lake existed in its beautiful and quiet seclusion for years, and even the building of the Cheatham Dam in 1952 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers didn't disturb this peaceful setting—a setting which now encompasses a vast wildlife refuge that is restricted from residential or commercial development.

The developers who built the new Harpeth Shoals Marina and the soon-to-be-built Braxton Condominiums are counting on that quiet beauty and the natural surroundings as a sales and marketing tool for their new \$75 million, 28-acre venture. Cheatham County Mayor Bill Orange has called the development the most significant groundbreaking in the county since the historic courthouse was built in Ashland City, the county seat, in 1868.

John Rankin, owner of Progress Capital Partners, the developers of The Braxton Condominiums at Harpeth Shoals Marina, has a personal connection to Cheatham County. "My grandparents are all from this area—Cheatham County and Ashland City—and when I considered doing a project of this type, I realized that the river at Cheatham Lake makes a great site. It works in all the important environmental and zoning aspects, and it is a place where people are going to come with their boats anyway."

One of the selling points for the condominiums and the marina will be their proximity to Nashville. "Highway 12 is like the last frontier," says Philip McGown of Seigenthaler Public Relations, representing Progress Capital Partners. "Cheatham County is no longer just the River Road between Clarksville and Nashville. It's coming into its own."

Groundbreaking on the project took place in July 2006, and the Harpeth Shoals Marina recently celebrated its grand opening. The 10-acre marina site includes 161 boat slips, a market, laundry facilities, a fuel dock, and public launch and transient moorage for day use or overnight boaters.

The Braxton Condominiums, two 10-story high-rises situated right on the river and overlooking the picturesque hills and bluffs of Cheatham County, will have 136 units with eight different floor plans, along with eight penthouses ranging in size from 1,500 to 4,000 square feet (including 350-square-foot outdoor terrace spaces). Downtown Ashland City is just a short walk from The Braxton.

The grand scope of the new development—Harpeth Shoals Marina is the first new marina development on the Cumberland River in 31 years—is music to the ears of the members of the Cheatham County Joint Economic and Community Development Board (JECDB). James Fenton, the board's executive director, lauds the new development as a big step forward in their goal of a balanced community in Cheatham County.

"Our goal is to create more opportunities for those members of the workforce who now leave the county every day to stay here and work—and to entice more folks into the county who want to enjoy our natural resources."

Fenton outlines several priorities the board has in its implementation of that goal, including the increase of broadband access to help existing businesses while attracting new ones; the care and encouragement of existing businesses (the county recently added about 240 new jobs); the development and addition of retail, office and commercial opportunities; utilizing the gorgeous waterways, the wildlife preserve, nationally recognized walking trails, and other abundant natural resources to increase tourism revenues; and the recruitment of retirees to the county.

"Our county is going through a transitional period," says Debbie Thrash, president and CEO of Community Bank & Trust in Ashland City. "We've always been the best-kept secret in Middle Tennessee with our incredible quality

of life, but now, through the efforts of the JECDB and private citizens throughout the county, we're transitioning to something better."

Thrash commends the "forward-thinking" of County Mayor Orange and Fenton, for both their planning and their vision of what the county can and will be. "Not only in Ashland City, but in Pegram, Kingston Springs and Pleasant View, we're seeing a lot of positive growth, including the restoration and renovation of our towns—even as we retain our community-oriented atmosphere."

Ashland City has been undergoing a revival of sorts, underscored by the Renaissance Ashland City project that was organized several years ago to spur and maintain interest in restoring and revitalizing the downtown area. Myrla Sproat, chairperson of Renaissance Ashland City, says that the group's inspiration came to town with Dan Burden, a renowned city planner. After attending meetings in Davidson County, Burden visited Ashland City, speaking to a standing room-only crowd at the historic courthouse.

"He explained his vision of what downtown Ashland City could be," Sproat says. "He talked about our town as a place of destination and a gathering point, with street seating, pedestrian-level parking and a more 'walkable' downtown area." A committee was formed immediately following Burden's visit, and soon after, an area of the city was defined, a master plan was developed for that section, and a proposal was submitted and accepted. "Then we began looking for the money," Sproat says with a laugh. "Small towns simply do not have the budgets for projects of this type, so we applied for and received two TEA-21 grants from the state, and in March, Gov. Bredeesen announced that Ashland City will be awarded a 'Roadscapes Grant,'" Sproat says.

The Renaissance Ashland City master plan has received three different awards of recognition—through Cumberland Tomorrow, Award of Excellence and Tennessee Landscape Architects. "We believe that our master plan has been beneficial on a private level, too," Sproat says. "We can see that developers like Progress Capital Partners are willing to inject private money into the economy on the premise that the master plan is going to happen. In addition to the marina, Rankin is also developing a couple of office buildings right across from the courthouse—another great example of cooperation from the private sector." In Kingston Springs, a vital town in the early 1900s that dropped to an historically low population in the 1960s, growth, while somewhat inhibited by the wildlife refuge, is happening.

"We're rebuilding Main Street in downtown Kingston Springs," Laurie Cooper, city manager, says. "We're starting construction on a streetscape that will include a new street, sidewalks and lighting. To add to the atmosphere, we have Mack & Kates, an upscale restaurant on Main Street, and The Filling Station, a neighborhood pub. "The Yellow Building" will soon house a guitar store, and we also have photography studios and a yoga studio," Cooper says. "Ten years ago, most of these buildings were empty."

Long viewed as a bedroom community to Nashville, Kingston Springs embraces that reputation.

"Our first condominiums are going up soon," Cooper says, "and 70 lots have been newly designated for homes in the \$350,000 and up range."

She points out that all of Cheatham County has spent the last 19 to 20 months rewriting subdivision regulations to incorporate new conservation policies.

"This is fairly innovative for this part of the country, and it plays well to Kingston Springs because we have pockets of little spaces that will be conserved, helping us to maintain our small town atmosphere and natural beauty." Pleasant View Mayor Kerry McCarver, a Cheatham County native, calls his community "the last Mayberry."

"We're small enough that everyone knows everyone, and our community personality is such that new folks connect quickly with the town," he says. Pleasant View is embracing quality residential growth and, like Kingston Springs, is also seeing new, high-end developers taking a fresh look at the area. "Our median income is well above the county and state averages," McCarver says, "and while we don't have as many housetops, our families have money to spend."

A new development is going up in Pleasant View with houses in the \$200,000 to \$250,000 range, with curved streets and sidewalks. "The standards in Pleasant View are being set and adhered to by the developers and builders," McCarver says, "and that is a win-win situation for everyone."

On the retail front, companies are now inquiring about Pleasant View, from mom-and-pop businesses to national franchises. Catfish One, a company out of Mississippi with about 50 stores, recently opened its first franchise location in Tennessee in Pleasant View.

Gary Binkley, executive director of the Cheatham County Chamber of Commerce, characterizes Pegram as a quiet community with active people.

"I think the best example of the spirit of Pegram is the 'Friends of Pegram Park,'" Binkley says. "That group's initiative and drive in acquiring and providing the financial resources for the development of recreational programs, equipment and facilities for the Pegram Park is amazing and a testament to a citizenry that cares about its town."

The Friends of Pegram Park hold regular songwriters' nights to raise money for the park. Other activities include the annual Fourth of July celebration, renowned as one of the best in the state, and the county-wide fish fry each spring, a 50-year-old tradition that draws people from all over Tennessee.

Cheatham, the third-fastest growing county in the state of Tennessee, is one of the few counties with a debt level that has decreased in the last few years, a phenomenon Binkley attributes to the much-ballyhooed development tax, the improved highway system, proximity to Nashville and several other large towns, and the limitation on development resulting from the federally owned wildlife preserve.

"The development tax and the fact that one-eighth of our land mass is not developable might seem to be at odds," Binkley says, "but they work together to promote quality progress." Binkley points out that the growth and development in Cheatham County is planned and executed with care and a vision of the future. "The development tax helped our county pay down our debt and provide a number of quality services to our citizens," he says. "We have built new schools, a new library, a new health department and a new ambulance services building. We have a fund set up that pays cash for new ambulances and school buses. Our crime rate is down, and our schools are now some of the best in the state."

There is no question that Cheatham County is a bedroom community to the counties surrounding it, but with more people looking to leave the larger metropolitan areas and embrace a quality of life that incorporates nature and neighborliness, the outlook for Cheatham is bright indeed. The marketing line used by Renaissance Ashland City is apt for the entire county: "Into the future, with a clear vision, a clear plan, and the heart and soul of a small town."

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