

Coweta: Promised land currently on pause

By [Alex McRae](#)

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For two decades Coweta County has lived and died by the numbers. And for the most part, the numbers have been good.

U.S. Census data show that from the mid-eighties to the mid-2000s, the local economy boomed as a combination of good amenities, excellent schools, low property taxes, great real estate values and easy access to first-class ground and air transportation made Coweta a promised land for those seeking the good life.

The population boomed, soaring from 39,268 in 1980 to 89,215 in 2000, and passing the 100,000 mark in 2003. As the boom continued, an increasing number of retailers, manufacturers and commuters clamored to call Coweta home.

Then in late 2007, a recession gripped the nation -- and Coweta was not immune.

The damage was evident in recently-released 2009 census estimates. Coweta can still boast of being the 49th-fastest growing county in the nation, but in part because things have slowed down so much elsewhere.

Census estimates delivered just three years ago predicted Coweta's population would reach 132,00 by this year. That probably won't happen. The latest estimates show a Coweta population of 127,111, as of July 1, 2009.

You don't have to be a number cruncher to know Coweta's boom is on pause. Evidence abounds in the glut of shuttered retail business, the bounty of "For Sale" signs and the growing lines at the unemployment office.

Coweta's unemployment rate was reported at 10.9 percent in December 2009. A few years ago, that would have been unthinkable.

Today, the census numbers that once promised a bright future are cause for uncertainty and gloom.

But while many see the economic slowdown as a disaster, some see opportunities. Often in the most unexpected places.

In the mid 2000s, Coweta's housing boom placed our county solidly among the nation's fastest-growing communities. New subdivisions replaced former cotton fields virtually every day.



Photo by Alex McRae

There may be light in the clouds that have hovered over the home building industry. Scott Barnett, who recently opened his own building supply business in Coweta with a partner, says some contractors are even building speculative houses again. Barnett knows one builder who recently put up three specs and has sold two of them.

In 2007, some 645 housing permits valued at \$160.7 million were issued and the real estate market had never been better.

Then the recession hit.

Only 263 housing permits valued at \$74.7 million were issued in Coweta County in 2008. Through August 2009, Coweta County issued just 103 housing permits, valued at \$32.6 million. By then, many builders were out of business or headed there.

Most saw nothing but bleak prospects for the future. But Scott Barnett saw an opportunity.

Barnett has worked in the construction business most of his life, eventually rising to a senior management position with PlyMart, where he worked for 16 years.

During the boom, Barnett's fortunes rose with his company's. But when the bust came, PlyMart -- and many of its competitors -- were forced to close. In 2008, PlyMart went bankrupt and Barnett was looking for a job.

He found work with an out-of-town former competitor. He was happy to be employed in the business he loved, but Barnett longed to spend more time in Coweta, working with the many friends he had made in the local building business.

Although more than 60 percent of his former PlyMart customers were forced out of business, Barnett remained in touch with them and the builders still working. The more he talked, the more he was convinced there was still a chance for a locally-owned and operated building supply company to survive and thrive in Coweta County.

Late last year -- at the height of the worst building recession in recent memory -- Barnett and a former PlyMart coworker, Phil Cheeves, decided to open their own business in Coweta County.

"I was born and raised in Coweta County," Barnett says. "I didn't want to give up on it. Besides, we didn't think things could get worse. It looked like there was no way to go but up."

On Jan. 4, 2010, Barnett & Cheeves Building Materials opened for business on Highway 16 just west of Raymond. Barnett says the first few weeks were tense.

"I'd sit up half the night and think 'what in the world have I gotten into?'" he says. "But after a month, it looked like we were going to make it. In fact, we're doing better than anybody expected."

Barnett & Cheeves currently has six employees and that number is expected to rise soon. Barnett says that right now, starting a new business with a lean operation and low overhead makes sense for people like him.

"We know how tight things are and we watch every dime," he says. "It's a lean operation but that's the only way to operate. We've been blessed. Some of my old customers stuck with me and I'm happy to see things are actually picking up a little. If we can keep expenses down we'll make it even in slow times."

In fact, things may have started turning around already, according to Barnett. He says his builders are doing "a ton" of remodeling. People are especially interested in lowering power and tax bills by installing energy-efficient windows that currently qualify for federal tax credits.

Some contractors are even building speculative houses again. Barnett knows one builder who recently put up three specs and has already sold two of them.

"Not everybody wants a foreclosure," he says. "Some people want a new house and nothing else."

Barnett says the numbers don't back him up yet, but he feels like the local building industry is finally making a comeback.

"You do what you have to do to survive," Barnett says. "But you can feel the mood getting better. I think we're going to make it."