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SEEING THE INVISIBLE | A yearlong look at NC poverty

The picked-on in Brunswick County's paradise

By Gene Nichol

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Rev. Curtis McMillian, a lifelong Royal Oak resident, lives across the street from the border of the proposed Brunswick County Landfill expansion. He believes the existing landfill has forced him to buy bottled water to drink and cook since the late 1990s when his well water became discolored and foul. His front porch is subjected to a potent stench when the wind is right.

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- THE SERIES

On the last Sunday of each month this year, UNC Professor Gene Nichol will examine the faces and issues behind the rising poverty numbers in North Carolina. Read the other installments at newsobserver.com/ncpoverty.

Brunswick County, N.C., is quite the place – at least for some of its residents. In the state's southeast corner, Brunswick is bordered on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, the north by New Hanover County and the south by that other "Carolina." It is one of our largest counties, occupying much of the ground between Wilmington and Myrtle Beach. Almost 900 square miles. Think sand, sun and golf.

Many of its destinations are famed: Bald Head Island, Oak Island, Holden Beach, Ocean Isle, Sunset Beach, Caswell Beach, Southport.

At the entrance to the county from the north on N.C. 17, billboards proliferate. "Luxury gated communities" are the boasted fare. Tony residential developments sound antebellum themes: St. James Plantation, Winding River Plantation, River Sea Plantation, Mallory Creek Plantation. We get the point. It's handsome. As the real estate brochures proclaim, "Picture Perfect."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Brunswick is also booming. The Census Bureau just reported it is one of the 100 fastest-growing counties in the nation. Last year, Brunswick's population grew from 107,431 to 112,257. In the preceding decade, its population rose by 50 percent.

But not all have prospered.

As the county has blossomed, the poverty rate for African-Americans has risen from 22 percent to 29 percent. Blacks were almost 15 percent of the population in 2000. A decade later, they were 11 percent. Between 1990 and 2005, the county added almost 40,000 (net) new members, yet the number of black residents fell by more than 2,000.

Royal Oak is a small, historic, almost entirely African-American community in the center of the county between Bolivia and Shallotte. Adjacent to the unincorporated town of Supply, Royal Oak was formed by freed slaves in the 19th century. It is lodged on the "wrong side" of N.C. 17.

At least some of its 300 inhabitants trace their lineage to blacks expelled from Wilmington in the violent racial coup of 1898. While current poverty rates are higher than state averages, the community is principally comprised of longstanding, long-resided, working-class families – families that have been repeatedly assaulted by the county in its placement of necessary nuisances.

As Resea Willis of Brunswick Housing Opportunity explains: "Anything you wouldn't want next to you has been put in Royal Oak."

In the 1970s, the county began operating an unlined solid-waste facility in Royal Oak. A few years later, new regulations forced the landfill to accept only construction and demolition (C&D) material.

In 1997, Brunswick placed its county waste transfer station in Royal Oak. All C&D material and all municipal solid waste produced in the sprawling county, therefore, treks through, or stays in, tiny Royal Oak – far from the beach communities that generate the bulk of it. As a result, noise, odor, litter, rodents, particulates and heavy truck traffic increase. Air quality, water quality and property values diminish.

In 2000, the county moved the animal shelter from its previous location near the Winding River Plantation to Royal Oak.

curiously, Royal Oak residents had long lobbied, unsuccessfully, for water and sewer service from Brunswick County. Such lines were installed, of course, to accompany the new animal shelter – passing through Royal Oak neighborhoods in the process. Still, hookups weren't provided.

Lewis Dozier, president of the Royal Oak Concerned Citizens Association, puts it this way: "They'll make sure stray animals have clean water, but we're not important enough for that."

In 2006, the county sited a new wastewater treatment facility in Royal Oak. Piling on.

Two years ago, Brunswick County began officially to push forward plans to dramatically expand the C&D landfill in Royal Oak – making it three times its current size and increasing its operating life by 100 years. Apparently "expansions" are governed by notably more lenient environmental standards than new landfills. Today, Royal Oak neighborhoods sport yard signs reading "Don't Dump On Us."

The Rev. Curtis McMillian, a Royal Oak native, lives across a narrow road from the border of the proposed gigantic expansion. Proximity to the landfill, he believes, has forced him to buy bottled water for drinking and cooking since the late 1990s, when his well water became discolored and foul. His front porch is subjected to a potent stench when the wind is right.

Endless trucks, driving up and down the dirt roads, create plumes of dust. His daughter can't play outside because the conditions inflame her asthma. Scavenger birds hover. The value of his parcel is markedly diminished. And the county has never offered to purchase it. McMillian and many of his neighbors feel trapped by a government that "doesn't care about our opinions, our worth, our health or our existence."

Fortunately, McMillian, Dozier and ROCCA – with the help of the UNC Civil Rights Center – have pressed back, with some success, against the attempted landfill expansion. In their view, Brunswick County's actions toward their community, writ large, are rooted in race. It's hard to disagree.

But is the traditional alternative, purportedly neutral justification, any better? It goes something like this:

"We have to put the dumps and other noxious uses somewhere. Do you actually think we could place them near wealthy subdivisions – where property values are high and political muscle strong? Come on.

"We don't dump on Royal Oak neighborhoods because they're black. We dump on them because they're poor. We're not racists. We're economists. If they have to subsidize their wealthy neighbors with their property, their health and their lives, so be it. It's the American way."

The question for us is whether we'll let it remain so.

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at the UNC School of Law and director of the school's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity.

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