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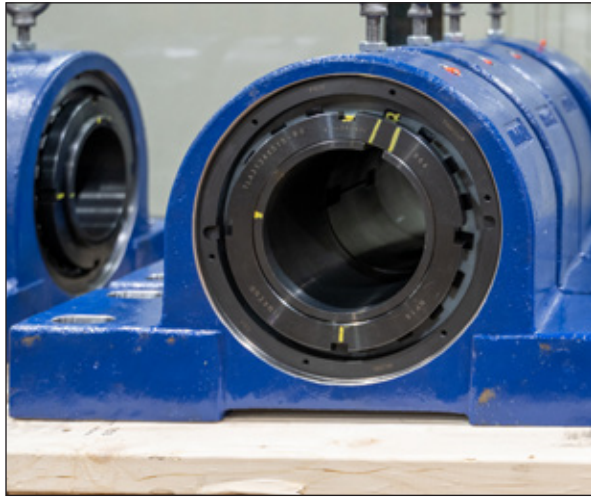


Coming this summer



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On the cover: IPCD President Bill Harvey examines a pillow block bearing. (Chris Miller photo)



General manager Paul Wilkins, left, and President Bill Harvey examine a piece of equipment. (Photo by My Different Perspective/Michael Lanier)

Rolling along

Conveyor systems manufacturer keeps industry moving

BY CHRIS MILLER
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Conveyor systems are critical pieces of mechanical handling equipment that help move materials from one location to another, a critical component for many businesses, especially those that deal with heavy objects, such as quarries or lumber yards.

While many people know about conveyor belts — think of the famous “I Love Lucy” chocolate factory scene — there are tons of other less-known conveyor systems critical to the success of industries across the country including screw conveyors and chain conveyors.

But have you ever thought about how these

numerous systems, and the components needed to produce them, get made?

That’s where a company like Industrial Products Conveyors & Drives is so critical. Founded in Albemarle as Industrial Products by Jack Phillips in 1976, the company has gone through several iterations over the years, but has never lost sight of Phillips’ original vision of “Taking Care of Business” and “Taking Care of the Customer.”

The company changed to IPCD in 2011, when Bill Harvey, a well-known figure within the conveyor pulley manufacturing industry, purchased the business and moved it to its current location in Richfield, along N.C. Highway 49, about two miles past Richfield Park.

“We’ve been in Stanly County since day one,” Harvey said, noting that with so many of its employees from the area, “we’ve never really thought about going to Charlotte or anywhere else.”

IPCD is one of the leading stocking distributors in the Southeast region, specializing in conveyor pulleys, screw conveyors, conveyor idlers, belt scrapers and many other components critical to conveyor systems.

“We service any type of industrial company around, whether it’s a cement plant, or a chicken plant or a paper mill or a rock quarry or a coal mine or a power plant,” Harvey said. “Any type of operation that has moving parts are potential customers for us.”



Originally from Michigan, Harvey moved to North Carolina in 1987 while working for Browning Manufacturing. Shortly after leaving Browning to work for one of its distributors, Harvey, who was in his late 20s, decided he didn't want to continue working for others.

Having sold conveyor pulleys for the mining industry, Harvey leveraged his experience and with the help of several investors, opened Conveyor Components Incorporated in 1992 in Albemarle. What began as a small operation eventually grew over two decades into the second largest supplier of conveyor pulleys in the nation.

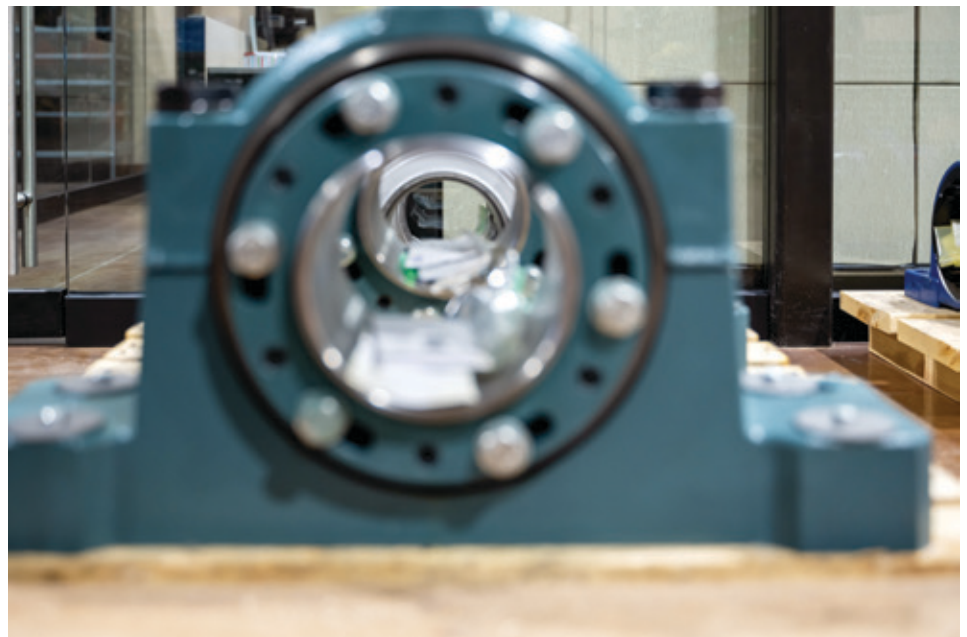
"We were the manufacturer and we had a network of distributors all around North America, Mexico and Canada and down into the West In-

dies," he said.

CCI quickly stood out among its many competitors with its focus on manufacturing products, such as conveyor pulleys, for companies dealing with heavy machinery and doing whatever it takes to satisfy its customers.

"In the past, if a cement mill was down, they would call the manufacturer and say, 'Hey, we're down' and the manufacturer would say, 'Well, you're just going to have to wait,' Harvey recalls. "We didn't take that attitude. We said, 'When do you need it?' and they say, 'We need it now' and we say, 'Okay, we'll stay all night.' "

He also created new techniques, such as color-coding certain products, which similar companies have since adopted.



Under Harvey's leadership, CCI built a "pretty awesome reputation" in the industry for more than two decades, before the business, which had about 120 employees at its peak, was sold in 2008 to Martin Sprocket & Gear. Harvey stayed on as a vice president for the next decade, overseeing the pulley conveyor division and traveling the world as new plants opened.

Being away from his wife and three young children, though, began to take a toll on Harvey.

"It was brutal," he said. "I was gone a lot and just got tired of it."

Similar to how he felt as a young kid working for Browning, Harvey again felt the itch to change things up. So he acquired Industrial Products and Power Transmission from Dan Phillips in 2016, who was Jack Phillips' nephew, and re-located the site a year later to Richfield. He also changed the name to reflect his background with conveyor systems.

"I wanted to have my own business and I wanted to make decisions," Harvey said about the decision to purchase the company. "I just wanted to have a small business, have fun and be able to use the skills that I learned through all those years."

Though IPCD's influence extends well beyond North Carolina, many of its customers are based in Stanly County, including the City of Albemarle, Aquadale Quarry, Dean's Ready Mixed, Fiberon and Culp Lumber Co., and the surrounding area, including Duke Energy, Hedrick Industries, Vulcan Materials and Martin Marietta.

"We've focused on what the customer's individual needs are," Harvey said. "Instead of us telling the customers what they were going to get, we listened to what their needs were and we found a way to do what they're asking and what they needed in order to get their manufacturing facilities running."

Coming from a manufacturing background, there was a bit of a learning curve for Harvey, as he is now on the "exact opposite side of the supply chain."

In the six years since Harvey took over, IPCD has flourished. The number of employees has more than doubled from nine in 2016 to now 20, the customer base has expanded due to Harvey's connections during his CCI days, and, most importantly, sales have increased about 700 percent.

"We've turned into a real force to be reckoned with in this market area," Harvey said.

But the company is not resting on its laurels. In early 2022, IPCD broke ground on a \$3 million manufacturing



*Bill Harvey examines some wing pulleys.
(Chris Miller photo)*

facility, adding about 10,000 square feet to the business. An additional 20 employees will be hired within the next several years.

A public hearing regarding the expansion was conducted by the Stanly County Board of Commissioners in early February 2022, followed by the com-

missioners unanimously approving an economic development incentive grant for the company.

"IPCD is pleased to carry on the leg-

acy of Mr. Jack Phillips who founded Industrial Products in 1976," Harvey said in a statement after the grant was approved. At the time, the expansion was expected to result in approximately \$2.1 million in new taxable investments.

The new facility, which should open sometime in the spring, will have ample space for the company to perform its own project estimating, engineering, drafting and computer-aided design along with a warehouse with saws, lathes, milling machines and a plasma burn table to manufacture the necessary components.

"Everybody in this industry buys parts from other people...so I can't make an electric motor and I can't make an airbox, but I can take all those, design them on our systems and put them together so we have a finished system," he said.

The idea is that eventually the company should be able to fabricate products that they currently have to outsource from various vendors, including the Minnesota-based Superior Industries, which manufactures many of IPCD's inventory.

"Instead of just handling product, we will be making our own product,"





said warehouse manager Scott Bailey. “We will be manufacturing some of our own parts and shipping them out.”

Throughout his career, Harvey has made it a priority to make sure his employees, many of whom are from Stanly County, are not only in positions to succeed but also feel valued.

As head of a small company, Harvey has gotten to know each of his workers, inviting them to his home each year on Lake Tillery. He also organizes trips for his sales team, including fishing in Blowing Rock and participating in Skip Barber Racing School with Virginia International Raceway.

“Any company is really only as good as the employees that you have and we’ve really tried to hire the right people,” he said. “We’ve got a great team right here and every single person will give you the shirt off their back.

“They’re all super dedicated,” he added. “We’re very lucky.”

A few of the employees have known Harvey for many years, dating back to their time together at CCI. Jason “Buck” Bost, for instance, came to work at IPCD three years ago because he wanted to be part of a growing business, and reestab-

lish his connection with Harvey.

Bailey, the warehouse manager who has known Harvey since 1996, visited the business a few years ago to order a part when Harvey, who Bailey said knew he was not happy with his current job, offered him employment at IPCD.

“Bill is a good boss, that’s why everyone wants to come work for him,” Bailey said, noting he gets the most out of his employees. “You can be demanding if you can be fair and treat people with respect and he’s always done that.”

Harvey also encourages giving back to the community, as IPCD has helped numerous organizations over the years, including Relay for Life, Dream on 3 and Gateway of Hope. As part of a holiday campaign drive, the company in late 2022 raised \$1,445 in donations for Gateway of Hope.

“Great Job on your generosity this Holiday Season!” Harvey emailed his team about the money raised.

IPCD stores much of the inventory it has purchased from manufacturers inside its headquarters for all to see. (Chris Miller photo)

But while Harvey values his employees’ hard work and commitment to the job, he makes it known that family priorities, especially involving children, always come first.

“Bill has three children of his own and a handful of grandkids that are really important to him and so he knows how

important our kids and our family are to us,” said general manager Paul Wilkins.

“If we have an employee that has a kid that’s going to be in a Thanksgiving play, I don’t want them to do the same thing that I did, I missed all those,” Harvey said. “They’re going to go see their kid’s Thanksgiving play because you only get one time around.”

Though he has no plans on stepping down anytime soon, Harvey, who is 61, has still thought about what the future of the company will look like when he is no longer around.

And that is where his 27-year-old son Ryan, who lives in Los Angeles and is already in the industry, comes into play. Ryan will be moving back to the area in the early summer to work with his father, with the plan of eventually taking over once Harvey retires.

“It’s kind of all fallen together because he is following almost the same footsteps that I did,” Harvey said, noting that his son currently works for an original equipment manufacturer. “He’s learned all different aspects and now he gets to come be a businessman and learn how this small company operates.”

Bringing in Ryan also aligns with Harvey’s goal of hiring younger people, as the company has several employees over 60 years old.

“We don’t want to work forever so we’re really on a mission to bring in youth,” he said.

Looking ahead, Harvey acknowledges that big changes are coming but he is excited with the company’s trajectory.

“It’s going to pan out and we’re going to take care of our customers and we’re going to be a good employer for Stanly County and keep doing what we’ve always done,” he said. “It’s fun. I love it.”





Senior Services Program Coordinator Alexa Sells oversees a pickleball game including Marielena Hange. (Chris Miller photo)

Aging gracefully

Stanly County Senior Services continues to provide programs

BY CHRIS MILLER
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Even though Stanly County's population continues to grow, it's not just young families calling the county home.

There are more residents 65 and older living in the county than people 18 and younger.

The North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management projects that the population of people 65 and older will increase by about 31% (from 12,377 in 2020 to 16,222) by 2040, while the population of people 85 and older will increase

by 94% (from 1,274 to 2,474), the two biggest jumps by any age group. Stanly residents 17 and younger are expected to decrease by 0.1%, while those 18-44 are predicted to increase by just 0.7%.

"That trend is going to continue upwards and I think it's going to take folks that work in this department to advocate for them," said Stanly County Senior Services director Pamela Sullivan, who oversees the Senior Center. "As people age, they need more services, they need more activities."

While she has been with Senior Services for almost a decade, Sullivan presents an interest-

ing intergenerational dynamic in that she is only 37. The same is true for Alexa Sells, the senior center's program coordinator, who is 24.

Sullivan and Sells acknowledged they are both "old souls," noting that each had older family members who played key roles in their upbringing.

When she was a young child in Norwood, Sullivan spent a lot of time with her great-aunt, who looked after her when Sullivan's parents were working.

"It feels like home whenever I am around older adults," Sullivan said.

After graduating with a degree in health ed-



Aaron Burris of Albemarle uses the blade from a pizza cutter to smooth out the edges on a wooden spoon. (Seth Mabry photo)



Sandra Burris and Donna Hunt enjoy yoga at the Senior Center. (Seth Mabry photo)

education & promotion from East Carolina University, Sullivan initially worked as a health educator with the Stanly County Health Department before transitioning to program coordinator with the senior center in 2011. Once Becky Weemhoff, the director of senior services for almost two decades, retired in April 2021, Sullivan took over the position.

"Initially, when I first started out, I was excited to see what all seniors could do and what they were capable of," Sullivan said.

Sells, who grew up in Richfield, had always had a strong relationship with her grandparents, who would often pick her up from school and looked after her during the summers.

"I have always enjoyed the older generations," Sells said. "I got to listen to



Sandra Burris talks with Senior Services Director Pamela Sullivan. (Chris Miller photo)



Janet Black, left, of Badin and Mary Carver of Albemarle work on basket weaving. (Seth Mabry photo)

all of my grandparents' stories and their music. Every part of my life has involved my grandparents, which has led me to appreciating these seniors (at the senior center)."

A Pfeiffer University graduate with a degree in exercise physiology, Sells applied for a job at the Stanly County Family YMCA when George Crooker, the YMCA CEO, talked to her about the

vacant program coordinator position at the senior center, thinking it could be a better fit for Sells.

Both Sullivan and Sells appreciate how the quality time spent with their



Norm Bickar of New London holds his carving of an elephant. (Seth Mabry photo)



Fred Misenheimer of Richfield works on a basket-weaving project. (Seth Mabry photo)



Alexa Sells interacts with Kathy Hunt. (Chris Miller photo)

older family members as children has helped with the work they are doing now on behalf of seniors throughout the county.

“As an adult, I look back on my time with my great-aunt and think how precious that was,” Sullivan said. “And now I have the opportunity to work with the older population in this community and I get to advocate on their behalf and work with them and for them on a daily basis.”

Since Sullivan took over, more virtual classes have been held, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many older adults are more comfortable participating from home, but also because people like Sells and Sullivan are more comfortable with newer technologies, such as Zoom. There was also a class twice a week in January, where the instructor taught seniors how to use smartphones.

The facility, which averages around 100 people each day, typically serves a

range of people from those in their 50s to people 90 and up. Sullivan said she wants to restart the tradition of hosting a joint birthday party for seniors turning 90 or older, something that has been put on hold due to the pandemic.

“So we try to capture people as young as we possibly can to keep them active and socially engaged,” Sullivan said.

In scheduling events each week, Sells understands that as much as seniors enjoy working out or playing card games, they come to the facility to be with each other. This is especially true for the roughly 3,200 people in Stanly that live alone, which comprises about 27% of all seniors 65 and older.

“We are an outlet for socialization,” she said. “They may tell you they’re coming to exercise class, but they are really coming to enjoy the time with their friends.”

Sells enjoys coming up with activities



Samples of the finished wood carvings. (Seth Mabry photo)



Left: Brenda Mabry of Porter carves a squirrel. **Right:** Aaron Burris of Albemarle uses the blade from a pizza cutter to smooth out the edges on a wooden spoon. (Seth Mabry photos)

and exercises that appeal to seniors and bring them to the center.

"I just love being that outlet because I will sit down and have a 30-minute conversation with them if that is what they need for that day," Sells added.

Harriet Brooks, 77, who has been an active member of the senior center for the past decade, appreciates the "enthusiasm and leadership" Sullivan and Sells have displayed, especially the many field trips they have organized, including recent ones to Charleston, South Carolina and Alaska.

"When we do the trips, one or both are always with us and they are always active and encouraging," Brooks said. "It's very good for us to be around younger people and they can see what we need and what works for us."

Fran Perusich, a New York native who has lived in Stanly since 2016, enjoys the trips, noting Sullivan and Sells "are busy with us all the time."

With the classes and activities that take place each week, along with field trips, "they keep us moving and keep us active," said Perusich's wife Chris. "They always make it interesting."

Many of the seniors have known Sells or Sullivan since the pair were kids. They have enjoyed reestablishing those connections over the last couple of years.

Sells, who helps lead the yoga class whenever the regular teacher is out, "is just as energetic here as she was when I knew her in elementary school," said Sandra Burris, who has been a regular at the center for the past two years.

"I think they have helped to keep us young," she added. "They have the energy and pass it on to us."

Coming from a fast-paced generation that always seems to be on the move, Sullivan said seniors have talked to her about slowing down and enjoying each moment.

"For me personally, I take that for granted because our lives are so busy and so constant and so whenever I hear them say that, I try and remind myself, 'Okay, I do need to slow down and just

enjoy the ride,' " she said.

As she looks toward the future, Sullivan said the senior center "will strive to be innovative in how we deliver vital programs and services and connect older adults to essential community resources to help them stay healthy, socially engaged and independent."

Neither Sullivan nor Sells have any plans on leaving the center anytime soon.

For Sullivan, working with older adults has been much more than just a paid position within the county.

"I wake up every day and I come to a job, but it's not just a job, it's a passion," she said, noting it is a "nice reward" to work with older adults. "I love working with this generation and being able to give back to them as they give back to me. It really is touching."



Chair yoga is another popular activity at the Stanly County Senior Center. (Seth Mabry photo)



Peer support specialist Marcus Berry, left, greets Brian, a client, at Uwharrie Harm Reduction Initiative's office inside Grace Place. (Chris Miller photo)

Treating with dignity

Uwharrie Harm Reduction Initiative works to help vulnerable, overlooked in community

BY CHRIS MILLER

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After handing Marcus Berry his identification card for verification purposes, Berry read through a checklist of items Brian could take with him including clean syringes, fentanyl strips, naloxone — a medication used to reverse or reduce the effects of opioids — alcohol pads and antibiotics. Sherry Harris then handed him a bag of the provisions taken from a large black supply closet.

Brian, who declined to identify his last name,

has been using drugs most of his life, including heroin. For the past few months, Brian, 37, has been coming to Uwharrie Harm Reduction Initiative's office inside Grace Place at 132 Church St., Albemarle, where he talks with peer support specialists like Berry and Harris, who are both former substance users. The office offers supplies to help him use drugs in a safer manner to hopefully extend his life.

"It keeps me from going out on the streets to get stuff to use to do drugs and having to reuse stuff and it cuts down on diseases and having to share needles with people that you know nothing

about," Brian said.

UHRI was founded in early 2020 and is under the umbrella of Open Hands of North Carolina, a faith-based organization headquartered in Lexington. It strives to reach people, many of whom are homeless, where they are and help them establish goals and expectations about their future, with the hope that individuals struggling with addiction will change their behavior and seek long-term help.

Brian appreciates that UHRI is not "pounding it in our heads" about the need to immediately seek help such as going to rehab. Instead,



leaning into UHRI's motto of "more grace...less judgment," Berry and the others take the time to listen and get to know the people as humans, and over time, relationships and trust begin to form.

"If I come in and I need to talk to them about something or something is going on that I need help with, I know I can talk with them," said Brian, who said he suffers from depression and anxiety.

Working to save lives

Bob Harmon, executive director of Open Hands, knows about the power of forming relationships with people in order to try and help them.

Harmon began volunteering in the 1990s at the homeless shelter in Cabarrus County. He remembers encountering a former star high school athlete who had been on the streets for many years.

"The worst part of it is that I'm invisible," Harmon recalled the man telling him. "I walk down the street and people don't see me. They look the other way.



UHRI Executive Director Gay Smith is joined by former peer support specialist Kari Womack. (Chris Miller photo)

"You see this guy walking around and he doesn't exist because you don't want to see him," Harmon added.

That was a profound moment for Har-

mon, who spent more than a decade in the corporate world before pivoting to work with struggling individuals, like the man at the homeless shelter. In 2013,

he became executive director of Open Hands of North Carolina.

Open Hands' first move into Stanly County occurred in 2016, when the feeding ministry Soul Food, known more often now as Grace Place, was formed to provide meals to people on the streets and others who might be struggling.

Taking advantage of the connections already formed with people in the community through Soul Food, in March 2020, a few weeks before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Open Hands began UHRI to help combat the opioid epidemic, which was killing tons of people each year. At the time, Stanly was often featured on the state's monthly list of top 10 counties with the highest rates of overdoses leading to hospital visits.

"In 2019, Stanly County approached us about working with harm reduction," Harmon said, noting Open Hands was initially resistant about the prospect.

But after talking with and hearing from people on the streets, many of whom were utilizing unsafe methods, the urgency to help these individuals

was apparent.

The ministry is in the basement of Grace Place, the former location of Tabernacle United Methodist Church. Adorned along the walls are messages and images of hope, including a sign that reads: “The struggle is REAL but so is GOD” and a painting of Jesus Christ, adorned with the crown of thorns.

Since opening its doors three years ago, UHRI has seen the number of people enrolled in its ministry rise from 115 people in 2020 to about 300 last year. The ministry calculates that by providing an average of 100 naloxone kits to people per month and assuming that about 20 are not used, roughly 40 overdoses are reversed each month. UHRI has provided naloxone to more than 3,000 people.

Berry estimates around 40 people often come to UHRI headquarters between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday and Friday to pick up syringes, naloxone, fentanyl test strips and other supplies that they may need. People receive a pack of 50 syringes (the needle size can vary) and are required to take 100 alcohol pads.

One of the regulars is 31-year-old Albemarle resident Vickie Harrison, a fentanyl user. She appreciates the opportunity each week to procure clean supplies, saying that before she started coming here, she would often use the same syringe multiple times.

“They don’t ever look down on us,” she said. “That’s the one good thing I love about them: They treat me like I’m a normal person and they are always friendly.”

Harrison often comes with her mother Amy Myers, a former health department employee, who is grateful that the people at UHRI take the time to get to know and care for her daughter.

“I’ll never give up on her,” Myers



said, noting she is confident Harrison will someday seek treatment. “Once you’re a mother, you’re always a mother,” she said.

Harmon understands that many in the community are likely critical about what they see as UHRI enabling drug users. But by creating a structured environment where people can receive key supplies as opposed to getting them on the streets, “we’re keeping them alive” and keeping them from contracting diseases, Harmon said.

Without the presence of UHRI in the community, “I’d probably be a lot sicker,” Harrison said, “because I would probably be using old supplies.”

As a result of the efforts of UHRI, along with a host of other local groups, including Stanly County EMS, commu-

Peer support specialist Marcus Berry gets items out of the supply closet for a client. (Chris Miller photo)

nity paramedics, Monarch and Project Lazarus coalition, the number of opioid overdoses in Stanly has declined in recent years. A total of 161 people overdosed in 2022, according to Stanly County EMS data provided by UHRI, compared with 190 people in 2021 and 258 in 2020.

‘On the frontlines’

Understanding that people are initially hesitant or even skeptical about talking to others about their addictions, UHRI provides a safe space where individuals can speak about their back-

ground without being judged or looked down upon.

“We want that relationship with them, we don’t want them to come and be in a cold, institutional-type situation,” Harmon said. “We want them to come in and feel welcome...we want to let them know that we love them.”

The peer support specialists, operating as de facto counselors, play a key role in making sure people — many of whom have gone through traumas in their lives and as a result are initially standoffish — feel safe and secure enough to share their experience with substance use disorder. As recovering substance users themselves, peer support specialists can understand and empathize with the everyday struggles individuals often face.

“They are awesome, they are so



(Metro Creative photo)



Every Tuesday and Friday, people come to UHRI’s office to receive supplies including Narcan nasal spray. (Chris Miller photo)

sweet,” said Vickie Harrison, noting she has their contact information and the specialists are always available whenever she wants to talk with them.

As part of the funding the county received as part of the national opioid settlement, UHRI received roughly \$60,000 to help pay for two peer support specialists. Berry works part-time while Harris, who started in late January, is full-time.

“We are on the frontlines...we go out into those (homeless) camps and take supplies and talk to them and try and build a rapport so they will feel comfortable coming here and talking about what’s going on,” said Berry, who has worked with UHRI since the summer of 2020 and is also a peer support specialist with Monarch. A former drug user and supplier for around 30 years, Berry aspired to become the biggest drug dealer in Charlotte before he turned his life around in 2016 and received treatment.

“Working here has opened me up to a whole other world,” Berry said, noting that at UHRI, “we think about the whole person.”

Harris, who is 10 years into her recovery, was drawn to the ministry due to its outreach efforts. Much of their time is spent out of the office, getting to know people across the county and spreading the word about UHRI.

“I believe you have to meet people where they are,” she said.

UHRI is working to develop a mobile unit that will allow Berry and Harris to meet and talk with people in the community who might not have the ability to come to the office.

Over time, once a connection has been established and trust has been secured, the specialists work to help people establish short-term goals about their future.

“We ask them: How do you want your life to look in the next six months?” Berry said. “We try to help them set goals that are obtainable. We don’t talk about 10 years from now. We talk about how do you want your life to look in the next 45 days or so? And they pretty much map it out for you.”

More than anything, the peer support specialists give people hope “that there is a way I can get out of this and I’m not stuck and not going to die,” Harmon said.

Building a community

The commitment to providing support to some of the most vulnerable in the community often requires significant time and investment. It can take several months or years before individuals feel comfortable enough to seek help and make a change in their lives. UHRI



*Community health educator and phlebotomist Quanna Norman prepares to test a patient.
(Chris Miller photo)*

Executive Director Gay Smith recalled talking with a woman each week for two years before she was taken to a sober living house.

“After two years of talking, she was ready,” said Smith, who took over from Robi Cagle, the original director, in August 2022.

Once open to receiving help, UHRI works to find individuals treatment options and funding that meets their needs. The ministry has transported people to detox centers around the greater Charlotte area, including as far as Greenville, South Carolina.

“We’ve taken them wherever they need to go to try and get them help,” Harmon said.

In addition to providing supplies, such as syringes, UHRI also operates a clinic where once every other week, medical professionals are available to test for diseases such as HIV, diabetes, Hepatitis C, Hepatitis A and endocarditis, and perform basic first aid care and wound treatment.

Quanna Norman, a community health educator and traveling phlebotomist, has been coming to UHRI every other Tuesday since July 2022. She offers free testing for HIV, syphilis and Hepatitis C.

Thinking she would see the same faces each visit, Norman, 28, said she has been surprised that for the most part different people have come to her for testing each week. She estimates she

sees around 15 to 20 people each visit.

Norman also takes time to listen whenever people want to talk to her about what they are going through, saying often the people “just need to get things off their chest.”

“You will be surprised how impactful you are when you don’t really think you are,” Norman said. “I have people that tell me, ‘Thank you so much for doing this service. Thank you so much for treating me as a human being. Thank you so much for seeing me and acknowledging me,’ “ she said.

UHRI also helps with basic necessities such as providing people with hygiene supplies, food bags and warm blankets during the winter. As part of a campaign in November 2022, UHRI was able to procure and distribute close to 300 blankets to those who needed them. The ministry also collaborates with NCWorks Career Center in Albemarle to help get people employed.

With so many people depending upon UHRI to meet many of their needs in order to survive, a strong sense of fellowship has formed.

“To watch folks interact here, this becomes a community,” Harmon said. “It becomes almost like a church to some people.”

Despite the many people UHRI has helped, Harmon would love for there to no longer be a need for his ministry to exist, even though he understands it is unrealistic.

“I hope that one day we’re closed down because we’ve got nothing to do,” he said.



(Charles Curcio photo)

Modern operation

Charlotte Pipe looks to future with new location in Oakboro

BY CHARLES CURCIO

charles.curcio@stanlynewspress.com

In an area of Stanly County which has seen a plethora of change over the last several years, one business looks to impact the western end and the county.

Due to start full operations in August, Charlotte Pipe and Foundry's new location in Oakboro will become the company's principal base of operations.

Brett Barbee, an Oakboro town commissioner who is the project procurement manager for Charlotte Pipe, said one of the biggest changes for Stanly citizens will be the plant being closer to its employees.

Many of the company's workers, Barbee said, live in Stanly and Cabarrus counties, and will have a 50-minute commute or longer reduced to 15 minutes.

Barbee said the closer drive will mean less money spent on gas getting to and from the

plant, which for employees will be like getting a raise.

Those employees also will walk into a new plant, Barbee said, "that is environmentally better to them, as far as better lighting, cleaner (facility), higher ceilings."

The higher ceilings, he explained, will allow the heat to rise, which will mean better working conditions and airflow. Barbee also said the plant will have the most modern dust collection system "definitely in the country and



the world.”

Charlotte Pipe’s Oakboro plant will also have more new technology with robotics taking some of the hard jobs of the plant.

Regarding more room in the plant, Barbee said, “we’re just amazed at the room we have to be able to safely do a job.”

Once Charlotte Pipe goes full time in Oakboro, Barbee said, it will hopefully attract other businesses. He thinks vendors who supply and support the plant could move their own operations to Stanly.

One such company, Piedmont Foundry, moved to Oakboro 10 years ago, Barbee said, and delivers consumable supplies to Charlotte Pipe and Grady Foundry in Biscoe.

Having more suppliers closer to the plant, he said, will help ease supply storage issues because the company will not have to keep as many supplies in its

warehouse.

Another hope for Charlotte Pipe, Barbee said, is to attract more restaurants to Oakboro. Currently, he noted, no restaurants are open for breakfast on Saturday mornings.

“There are 500 associates with Charlotte Pipe. We hope restaurants will come in and want to provide quality food for these folks,” Barbee said.

The property taxes the new foundry will pay to the town, he added, will go back into work updating Oakboro’s infrastructure.

“A lot of that is old at the moment and it needs to be redone,” Barbee said.

Most of the plant’s shifts, he said, start between 4:30 and 6 a.m. Employees will soon have a shorter walk from the parking lot to a new bathhouse as opposed to the current situation in Charlotte.

With new break facilities, including plans to have food trucks at the plant



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several days a week, the work life for employees will be more convenient, he said.

Because of the non-linear expansion of the current plant, the new straight-line production design of the new plant will increase production efficiency.

As project procurement manager, Barbee said he works with vendors to provide production equipment and machinery for the new plant.

Barbee worked on the line at Charlotte Pipe before getting to his current position.

“It’s a hot, dirty job. In my position, I try to make sure those guys have everything they need to make their job

better,” Barbee said.

As of a few weeks ago, Charlotte Pipe started melting metal for the first time. The effort “did not go so well,” he said, but he added the plant fixed the problems and went two weeks to make sure everything was ready to go.

“We successfully were able to melt iron and pour some molds, making an ingot block just to get our productions machines used,” Barbee said, adding the efforts are just practice to lead up to full operations.

Charlotte Pipe’s new plant in Oakboro is scheduled to open by August or sometime during the third quarter of the year, he added.



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Recruits get briefed during the beginning of the Cadet Academy's Mayday Safety and Survival training. (Chris Miller photo)

Burning passion

Cadet Academy heats up future of firefighting

BY CHRIS MILLER

chris.miller@stanlynypress.com

After Luke Burris finished his five years of service in the United States Marine Corps in 2021, he struggled to figure out what to do next with his life.

He found inspiration from one of his friends at the gym, who worked at the Albemarle Fire Department. "That looks cool," he thought about

what it would be like to become a firefighter.

Though Burris, 25, had no previous fire experience and had never even been inside a fire station, he decided to pursue a career with the fire service.

Burris, who is from the Aquadale area, was one of eight recruits that comprised the third class of the City of Albemarle's Firefighter Cadet Academy, an intensive 18-week training where cadets learn everything it takes to make it in the profession. This includes time in the class-

room combined with countless hours of physical exercise and a variety of real-world training exercises.

Of the eight recruits, five — including Burris — were already employed with the Albemarle Fire Department, while the other three came from Endy Fire Department, Ridgecrest Fire Department and Badin Lake Fire Department in Montgomery County.

For many cadets, the training represents their first introduction into the ins and outs of



***Above:** One of the recruits works his way through an entanglement box, one of several exercises during the Cadet Academy's Mayday Safety and Survival training, which took place over a three-day span in early January. **Left:** Luke Burris found inspiration to join the fire service from one of his friends at a local gym, who was an Albemarle firefighter. (Chris Miller photo)*

the firefighting profession and what will be expected of them once they graduate and become certified firefighters.

"It's designed so that anyone who wants to be in the fire service and can pass the physical requirements and the tests can come in," Albemarle Public Information Officer David Fath said. "You don't have to be a kid who's always wanted to be a firefighter to join this program."

But the cadets will be challenged in numerous ways.

After bringing up the topic of physical exercise, Burris remembers his friend from the gym telling him that

very little running was required of firefighters.

"So it was a shock when we started running about 15 miles a week," Burris said.

How the cadet academy began

The cadet academy was the brainchild of Assistant Fire Chief Kenny Kendall, who helped start the program with Fire Chief T. Pierre Brewton three years ago. It made sense for the department to train recruits in-house, where instructors could work with and get to know their future colleagues, as opposed to sending them elsewhere for



Above: Recruits learn about and work with fire hoses. (Contributed photo)



Left: Two recruits transport a dummy, named Rescue Randy, down several flights of stairs during the Cadet Academy's Mayday Safety and Survival training. (Chris Miller photo).

training.

"Why do we need to be doing that when we've got our own people and our own instructors?" said Kendall, who oversees the academy and used to be the chief of training. "We've got the capabilities of doing it right here at home, so let's do it here."

Albemarle Fire Department partners with many organizations, including Stanly Community College, which is one of the key funding sources, and Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, which lets the department utilize its Fire Training Center, to help get the program off the ground.

Burris' group, which graduated at the end of January, represented the third class to complete basic firefighting training with the department, earning their North Carolina State Firefighters Certification and getting sworn in as certified firefighters. Twenty-six cadets have come through the academy since 2020, Kendall said, of which 14 were AFD recruits.

There has been a notable spike in in-



Cadets are briefed before a live fire exercise. (Contributed photo)

terest among prospective firefighters wanting to join the department since the cadet academy got off the ground.

"I have definitely seen an increase in interest in joining the department," Albemarle Human Resources Director Dana Chaney said.

Over the last year, since the city implemented the applicant tracking system, Chaney said she has received an average of two firefighter applications each week.

Since February 2022, there have been 83 applicants, according to data provided by Fath, with about 25% being minority candidates.

While many of the recruits, including the eight that were part of the third class, tend to be in their 20s and 30s, Chaney said some people who have taken part in previous classes had been in their 40s.

'Where the rubber meets the road'

At the beginning of the program, cadets learn about the history of fire service in the United States, dating

back to Benjamin Franklin forming the country's first volunteer fire company in Philadelphia in 1736.

"A lot of them are really intrigued in history because that's what the fire service is," Kendall said. "The fire service is all about history and tradition. That's what we're built on."

Aside from the classroom portion of the academy, the recruits take part in a number of physically demanding and intense training modules. These trainings provide an opportunity for the students to put into action many of the topics they have learned in the classroom.

"This is where the rubber meets the road," Kendall said.

Nowhere is that maxim more true than during the week of live fire training, which culminates in the so-called Hell Day, where cadets have to function as a team in order to rescue several dummy victims hidden throughout a two-story burning building located at RCCC's Fire Training Center.

Making their way through the space by staying pressed against the walls, the firefighters have to touch and feel their way around in search of the vic-

tims while also avoiding obstacles such as shut doors and fallen cabinets and making sure the fire hose does not get pinched.

"They have to communicate, or it's not going to work," Kendall said about the exercise, which typically takes teams multiple attempts to successfully complete. The building becomes completely dark once the pallets have been set aflame, during which time temperatures in certain areas exceed 1,000 degrees.

"We want to see them under these extreme conditions and how they react," Kendall said. "They have to manage the scene and the situation."

The Stanly News & Press briefly joined the recruits on a Wednesday morning in mid-January, as they were beginning the first of three days of instruction at the Fire Training Center, specifically the five-story fire tower, as part of the Mayday Safety and Survival training.

The tower, which covers just over 3,400 square feet, hosts scenarios for the instruction and practice of operations such as ladder maneuvers,

high-angle and rappelling rescues and confined-space escapes. Recruits spent time transporting Rescue Randy, a 150-pound dummy, down flights of stairs while also freeing themselves from an entanglement box comprised of an assortment of wires.

"It gives us the opportunity to really get to know the firefighters as they're growing up," said Capt. Darrin Dissler, who was one of the instructors during the training. "Here I get to learn and help teach them and mold them. You learn the ins and outs of each person."

Forging strong relationships

One of the cadets that took part in the Mayday training was 21-year-old Matthew Collins, who has been serving Endy Volunteer Fire Department since 2017.

The training "is great because it leaves a good impression on Albemarle, so if I decide to go work for them, I already have a foot in the door," Collins said, noting his professional training provides more opportunities for him going forward as a firefighter.

Collins did not know many of his



Albemarle Assistant Fire Chief Kenny Kendall helped create the Cadet Academy three years ago. (Chris Miller photo)

fellow cadets at the beginning of the program, but has cultivated friendships that will last long after graduation.

“I went from knowing one of them to now spending all day every day with them since September,” Collins said. “I mean, I’ve spent more time with them than my family at home.”

And as their friendships have strengthened throughout the duration of the program — Collins refers to it as a “brotherhood” — so has their trust in each other.

“Anything I need them to do I trust that they are going to do and vice versa,” Collins said. “If I’m stuck anywhere, I trust any one of these guys to help me.”

As the recruits learn more about the fire service and what is expected

of them, they become more confident in their abilities and they improve upon areas where they may have initially struggled, such as certain elements of physical training, officials said.

Kendall, who starts getting to know the recruits on a personal level after the first few weeks of training, is especially proud of seeing the natural growth that occurs over the course of the 18 weeks. One recruit ran a 10:30-mile at the beginning of the training but by the time he graduated, Kendall said, he had shaved more than two minutes off his time.

“As we move forward and I see where they were and where they are when they graduate, it’s a good feeling,” Kendall said.

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Melissa Smith, right, works with Uriyah Bennett to solve a problem. (Charles Curcio photo)

New connections

Melissa Smith works to bring SCS, groups together

BY CHARLES CURCIO
charles.curcio@stanlynewspress.com

She was a principal for 10 years at Central Elementary and a teacher before that, but she now works in community involvement and drop-out prevention for Stanly County Schools.

Beyond her job title, however, Melissa Smith brings a fire and energy to help children, parents and staff find new ways to connect with people.

When she was initially approached for her current job, Smith said, she saw it as something she was already doing as a principal.

"I was like, 'OK. So you want me to do it on a different level?'...This is something I personally think everyone should do," Smith said.

She advocates getting to know "who you live with and where they are at, their strengths and just build on them."

Smith believes her role with SCS is to

physically get out from behind a desk every day, to be "viable, accessible and present to the community."

"You can't take the community out of me. I'm the type person that will make sure to be nosy about what's really going on, and see how what I'm hearing connects to the school system and benefits children," Smith said.

While having established relationships with many charitable organizations and businesses in the county, Smith said her focus is on the basic level.

"It's all about relationships. I'm constantly making connections and partnerships," Smith said.

Often, she said she will hear about Pfeiffer and a sports event, or initiatives from a local bank, and she will find the benefits for students for that activity or drive.

Many times people will not see SCS as a true partner, Smith said, so she tries to connect with people and remember her face and positivity as being associated with the schools.

"If it's a part of Stanly, it should be a part of the school system. Our students deserve the right to know what is available to them right here," Smith said. "The Stanly community, believe it or not, has enough resources to meet the needs of our students...it takes somebody to pull those resources together for people to see it is here. It is beneficial."

Smith mentioned a local group of concerned citizens looking to start a reading program for students who are lagging behind others.

Her job is to research how that program would work and gather input from many sources in the community.

"We are constantly researching and looking for ways that would best benefit

Stanly County Schools," Smith said. "It's not easy work because there is so much going on. It would be nice if everybody would pool their resources together and know that we're all on the same team, fighting the same battles."

Having too many separate entities, she said, is one place Stanly struggles in terms of not coming together as a community.

The diversity of students

Smith said another place the community must recognize is the diversity of students, adding adults must recognize diversity and "be willing to learn more about cultural representation."

In many ways, she said, children are assets in the lives of adults, but children often say adults just do not understand them.

"I am trying to find creative ways to let students know, 'I'm cool. I understand you. I know you are different. We can build on that.' It's going to take more adults being like that, letting go of their close mindedness and be more open to diversity...Stanly County has changed so much, so the people are going to have to change with it," Smith said.

If adults do not listen to kids, Smith

said, "when they get older, they'll turn Stanly upside down."

Kids will express their freedoms and stand up for their rights in the future, she said.

Help for all students

In her capacity with SCS, Smith said, help is available for all students, even those who do not make straight A's.

Sometimes, she said, a student just wants companionship, to know someone cares about them.

"Students know I'm not going to judge them when they tell me they have personal issues, but that I will try to help them navigate to a solution that is profitable for them. Whether they follow it or not is up to them," Smith said. "When they fall, I'm still there. That's the most impactful (thing)...they want to be heard."

Through SCS, Smith has helped create a mentoring program, asking principals for children not just with drug or behavior problems, but those who have a void in their lives.

"I connect them with counselors, and they connect students with mentors... even if it's just 20 minutes at lunch, (mentors) can come in and say, 'Hey!

I'm just checking on you. How are you doing?'"

Getting away from podiums

In her capacity as the director of community engagement, Smith said she has had many invitations to speak to organizations.

While she said she likes to be motivational, Smith believes more in action than words.

"I'm more of an action person. I started making connections," Smith said.

Early in her job, which started in 2021, she would learn about students who were hungry and connect them with Stanly Community Christian Ministry to receive services.

However, instead of stopping there, Smith said she has often driven food out to families as well who needed it. Bringing food affords her the opportunity to form relationships with people, to encourage them and ask questions about their lives.

One trailer park community in the county with kids in need received meals for Thanksgiving and Christmas, along with 30 new bikes as presents.

As a person of action, Smith said she often brings representatives from

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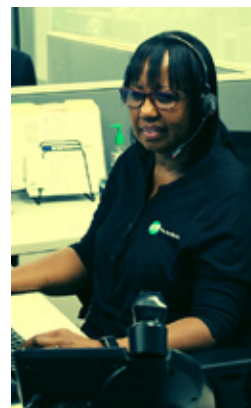
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banks, SCS and other institutions out into the field to see where the needs are. “I say, let’s get out of our chairs, our offices, our spaces, and go into these spaces. When they see the need, they want to know what to do next,” Smith said.

“That’s what this county misses. We’ll do an event, but you have to do things consistently and persistently. We drop too many things too fast. We do a good thing, but we need to make it pervasive so it’s part of the culture. That’s my biggest challenge,” Smith said.

However, she added, she never stops being thoughtful about learning things herself, saying, “I want to become more skillful at reaching people.”

Making a difference

Stanly County Schools Superintendent Dr. Jarrod Dennis talked about the difference Smith has made in the last year in her new role.

Dennis said Smith is integral to SCS by being a liaison between the schools and the community and coordinating SCS’s involvement in different community events.

Having worked in other school sys-

tems, Dennis said he created this position modeled from his past experience.

“There are certain communities that there is a disconnect between the community and the school system. That relationship is not there for a lot of different reasons,” Smith said, “connects us and those communities with different resources.”



“As you can tell, she is a genuine person,” Dennis said. “She’s a really caring person and wants the best for everyone. I think that really resonates with people. When they talk to her, they say, ‘This person really has my child’s best interest in mind.’”

Her experience of being a principal at Central for 10 years, Dennis said, showed she was always “ingrained in the community. It was a no-brainer when it came to the person we needed to fill that role.”

“You can’t fool children,” Dennis added. “They know when you care or don’t care. That’s one thing innately kids know...that is the one thing that is disarming when you talk to her. She will disarm you because you can feel that this person really cares for you, for your well being.”

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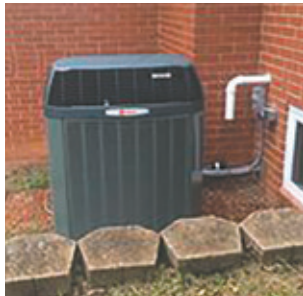
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Crossroads in Locust. (Toby Thorpe photo)

Raising the roof

New home construction continues at a rapid pace

BY TOBY THORPE

For the Stanly News & Press

With the presence of record inflation, seemingly endless accounts of understaffed workplaces and the aftereffects of a worldwide pandemic, it would be logical to conclude that the local market for housing and real estate would be suffering.

But a short drive around Stanly County, particularly through the areas in and west of Albemarle, illustrates that such logical conclu-

sions don't always reflect reality.

Construction, especially that of single-family homes, continues at a rapid pace throughout the county, despite economic conditions that would seem to discourage such projects.

"About 45% of the housing units in Albemarle built since 2000 have been built in the last four years," said Kevin Robinson, director of development services for the City of Albemarle.

Information provided by Scott Efird, planning and zoning director for the City of Locust, indicated a similar trend, with house

permits there having significantly increased from 2019-2022 over those for the period from 2015-2018.

"Much of this development is for new residents coming in from Mecklenburg County and other states," Stanly County Chief Zoning Officer and Planning Director Bob Remsburg.

"The growth was originally in the Oakboro and Locust areas, but has spread to other areas," Remsburg added.

While new home construction can be seen throughout Stanly, the areas in which most development is underway are Albemarle, Lo-



Morgan Hills in Albemarle. (Toby Thorpe photo)



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Albemarle

Having joined the City of Albemarle staff in the mid-2010s, Robinson has been present for the city’s largest increase in development in the last half-century.

With nearly half of the housing builds since 2000 having occurred since the beginning of 2019, that would translate to approximately 386 new homes having gone up in the county seat during that four-year period — not including multi-family units, duplexes and other units.

“We are also seeing an increase in the density and types of housing being built,” said Robinson, noting that the second phase of the Grandview Meadows development (off Anderson Road) is complete.

In addition, the Parkwest development (off Poplin Grove Church Road) is on schedule to be completed in 2023, as is the first phase of Morgan Hills (off Morgan Road).

“There are 130-plus homes that have been permitted, but are not yet complete,” Robinson added. “Most of these are in Parkwest and Morgan Hills.”

A number of lots in those subdivi-



Crossroads in Locust. (Toby Thorpe photo)

sions are pending approval as well, he said.

“Another 80-90 lots are yet to be per-

mitted in those neighborhoods (Parkwest and Morgan Hills), and they are likely to be built this year as well.”

Although the amount of housing currently being developed is significant,

the immediate future shows no signs of a slowdown.

“We have a little over 1,300 housing units across the several subdivisions approved in the last 3-4 years,” Robinson

added, “and apart from a small number of townhomes and duplexes, the earliest we will see most of these housing units completed in these developments will most likely be Fall 2024.”

Even more units are on the drawing board.

“We have another 1,100 proposed units that are still going through the approval process, plus another 950 that have been proposed, but have not yet submitted any formal plans, so it’s hard to say how long it will be before we see any of these constructed,” he said.

Locust

Information provided by Efird shows similar developmental growth to that in Albemarle.

A total of 570 permits over the period 2019-2022 for new home construction account for a 53% increase over the total issued during the preceding four years (303), according to statistics provided by Efird.

With the increased permitting, build-up of available lots is ongoing, said Efird, listing a number of housing developments with sites still under development.

“Whispering Hills, on Mission Church Road, has 388 lots remaining, and Cross-

roads, which is going up on Elm Street, still has 111,” said Efird. (Note: these figures are from January 2023.)

Efird noted several other developments with remaining spaces, including Meadowcreek Village (on N.C. Highway 200), with 92, Redah Phase 3 (on Church Street), with 36, and 20 family-home lots in the Red Bridge development (off N.C. Highway 24-27), as well as 21 townhome lots there.

One subdivision, Morgan Meadows on Meadowcreek Church Road, which contains 38 lots, was also completed in 2022, said Efird, who added that development in and around the city’s business and governmental hub, Locust Town Center, is continuing as well.

“Plans are for 80 townhomes, as well as mixed use development in the Town Center,” Efird noted.

An interesting trend is that while residential development increases, so does demand, and in turn, prices.

“The average price of houses in the area is about \$375,000,” said Efird, “and the average house is only on the market for about 10 days.”

Stanly County

The robust development seen in Albe-



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marle and Locust is not limited to incorporated areas, as statistics provided by Remsburg, who heads the county’s zoning and planning department, attest.

“Outside of the municipalities, we’ve primarily seen growth in the area south of Stanfield, and in the N.C. Highway 73 corridor,” said Remsburg.

“The Highway 73 growth is partly due to the popularity of

Above: Morgan Hills in Albemarle.

*Right: Crossroads in Locust.
(Toby Thorpe photos)*



Addict

Junkie

Addict

Artist

Junkie

Addict

Junkie

Student

Addict

Junkie

Addict

Brother

Addict

Junkie

Addict

Junkie

Brother

Addict

Addict

Artist

Addict

Addict

Addict

Addict

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Mt. Pleasant and the limited water and sewer availability in Cabarrus County,” he said, before noting that the largest area of development is found in Stanly’s southwestern corner.

“The area around River Road and Renee Ford Road south of Stanfield has had the most growth outside of municipal borders,” said Remsburg, who also noted that future growth is likely to occur between Locust and Ridgecrest once sewer availability increases.

According to Remsburg and Director of Central Permitting Carol Almond, single-family home permits have more than doubled in the county in only three years, jumping from 297 in 2020 to 691 in 2022.

“These numbers would not reflect

any homes in Locust that are actually in Cabarrus County, primarily Red Bridge and Meadowcreek Village,” added Remsburg.

(Note: These numbers do include Locust permits within Stanly County, as well as all permits in Albemarle.)

Remsburg listed six developments in which home construction is underway or complete. These include:

- Helms Builders, on River Road near Stanfield — 17 homes;
- Stanfield Farms, also on River Road — 32 homes;
- Garmon Mill Estates, also on River Road — 42 homes;
- Copper Ridge, on Nelson Mountain Road in Millingport — 20 homes;
- Hawthorne Commons, on Hatley

Farm Road in Millingport — 40 homes; and

• Tarleton, on N.C. Highway 73 near Albemarle — 10 homes.

Eight developments, consisting of 427 total lots, have been approved throughout the county, with construction yet to begin. In addition, street grading for two developments with 50 total lots in the Stanfield area is underway.

Although development and construction is strong throughout the county, Remsburg notes that controls are in place to preserve the county’s open space and rural character.

“The newly adopted Stanly County Land Use Plan should help to preserve the critical farming areas between Ridgecrest and New London, includ-

ing the Millingport and Plyler areas,” he said. “This plan should also slow the major subdivision of large parcels in the Aquadale area and south of Stanfield and Oakboro.

Remsburg also noted a number of positive trends taking place in municipalities, including infill development (vacant lots and spacers between homes being filled in), and development of residences near downtown Albemarle and Locust.

“Infill development is cost effective for utilities, and provides additional tax revenue,” said Remsburg, who added that the addition of downtown residences will benefit the areas by making the downtown areas more viable for commercial businesses.

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