

The Fairfield Advantage

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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County on the **RISE**

Fairfield County, Ohio is on the rise. "We are the fourth fastest growing county in the seventh largest state," says Economic Development Director Rick Szabrak. "That is a pretty good place to be."

Written by Claire Suttles

Current estimates see a 44% population growth by 2040. People are pouring into Fairfield County for two key reasons. "We have land and we are affordable. To have this much available land in such a large metro area is rare. There are great opportunities for people who want to have a lot of land, for people who want to have a bigger house [that] is more affordable. The land is also a great asset for companies that are looking for more space close to an interstate or a metro area."

Located 20 minutes from downtown Columbus, Fairfield County is more than just a group of bedroom communities. This vibrant county offers business opportunities in addition to a low cost of living and wide-open spaces. And, as the population grows, so do the advantages for local businesses. "We are going to see businesses move here to be where the people are," Mr. Szabrak points out. "Time is valuable and people don't want to spend as much time commuting. As you can see across the country, more and more businesses are moving out to the suburbs."



Fairfield County is already a shopping and service hub for most of southeastern Ohio, so residents have access to amenities, and local businesses can count on a strong customer base. "Folks come here every single day for jobs, to shop, to eat, to take advantage of the professional services and the healthcare that we have," says Cathy Bitler, Chair of the Board of the Fairfield 33 Development Alliance. "There is a market that has already been created simply because of our location."

Sectors that service the county's recent population growth are doing particularly well. "Health and education are growing; utilities, hospitality, and leisure are thriving," says Mr. Szabrak – "All the things that you see when you are getting a lot of households popping up." The Fairfield 33 Development Alliance has identified several additional industries that would be a good fit for the community, including food processing, biomedical, and advanced manufacturing. Biomedical would play off of the county's growing healthcare sector, while advanced manufacturing would build on the county's history of glass making.



Businesses considering a move to Fairfield County can take advantage of two established industrial parks, both of which have land ready for development. "We have two certified, shovel ready sites," Ms. Bitler reports. "Everything is in place. All utilities are in place, roads are in place – really everything that a business needs to come in and put the shovel in the ground. They are ready to go today."

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To be sure, any incoming business will find plenty of support in Fairfield County. In addition to enterprise and foreign trade zones, the county offers a revolving loan fund to provide gap and incentive financing for start-up and growing businesses in the community. The county also has a workforce development grant for companies that need to train their employees. Local businesses can also count on community partnerships such as the Fairfield 33 Development Alliance, an organization comprised of both public and private entities committed to promoting success along the U.S. Route 33 corridor. ▶▶



▶ “Because of the public private partnerships that we have, we can help businesses get up and running very quickly,” Ms. Bitler says. “We have such strong collaboration in this county between local governments and local business leaders that put their time and money behind making this county a better place to work. That is something that will drive our growth into the future.”

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Fairfield County can also offer plenty of skilled labor. “Not only do we have a growing population base in our own county, but there are a lot of areas to pull from with higher unemployment as you get south and southeast of Fairfield County,” Mr. Szabrak points out. “There are a lot of workers that can commute here very easily for jobs.” In addition, the county has a career and technical training center for skilled trades as well as two satellite campuses of Ohio University. “The great thing is that our educational sector works very closely with our Fairfield 33 Alliance to really understand the needs of our local manufacturers and look at tailoring programs to meet those needs.”

Fairfield County boasts a quality of life to match its business advantages. “I think the best part about Fairfield County is we are not just bedroom communities to Columbus,” Mr. Szabrak says. “We have cities and towns, like Pickerington and Canal Winchester, with distinct identities that just happen to be a stone’s throw to the 15th largest and 13th fastest growing city in the nation.”

The county boasts multiple city centers for shopping, dining, and entertainment. “We have downtowns, like in Lancaster, that are resurging,” Mr. Szabrak reports. “There’s ample opportunity to eat and shop local and you won’t run out of things to do. We’re the kind of place where you get to know your neighbors and can feel like you’re a part of a community. It’s perfect for young families.”

Fairfield County also enjoys a thriving arts scene. “The arts are a big attraction here,” says Ms. Bitler. “And I think that is something very unique in a county our size.” The community hosts multiple art festivals, the most famous of which is the Lancaster Festival, which is held each July for ten days. “It features visual arts and dramatic art and music. We even form our own symphony orchestra every year just for this festival. People come from all over the country to play in our orchestra

for ten days. Thousands of folks come to town just for that ten-day period.”

Top-notch school districts are another Fairfield County plus. “We have very strong school systems, so from an educational standpoint it is very attractive for families to live here,” Mr. Szabrak remarks. With so many new people moving in, the school districts have been growing rapidly and many of the schools are housed in newly built, state of the art facilities.

All of these lifestyle advantages combine with affordable, available land to create a winning combination, and the fact that this land is located near urban amenities sweetens the deal even more. In fact, some newcomers have “moved their families to Fairfield County specifically because they wanted to live on small farms,” says Ms. Bitler. “They could do that here and still be close to a thriving urban life. That holds a lot of appeal today for folks.”

The county’s diversified economy has already proved resilient in the recent past, indicating a strong future. “As manufacturing changed over the years, Fairfield County did well at diversifying,” Mr. Szabrak recalls. “When the recession hit in 2007, 2008 we did not feel as big an impact as other places because we have such a diverse economic base in this county. And I think that it is going to continue to diversify.”

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Fairfield County’s can-do attitude will help fuel this diversity. “We have such good entrepreneurial spirit in this county and I think we are going to see a lot more entrepreneurialism.” Mr. Szabrak predicts that many of these entrepreneurs will be rushing in to take advantage of new opportunities created by incoming corporations. “You are going to see businesses pop up to support all of the other businesses that will be coming to this county. There is not going to be a shortage of smaller businesses that are going to be able to help support those larger manufacturers.”

All of these predicted trends point toward lasting success and ongoing expansion. “I think we will see continued growth,” Ms. Bitler says. “In the last eight years, we have already seen \$289million in private investment. We are right on the brink of exploding.” ■



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