Salisbury: The Crossroads at a crossroads

Written by Jeremy Cox Staff Writer
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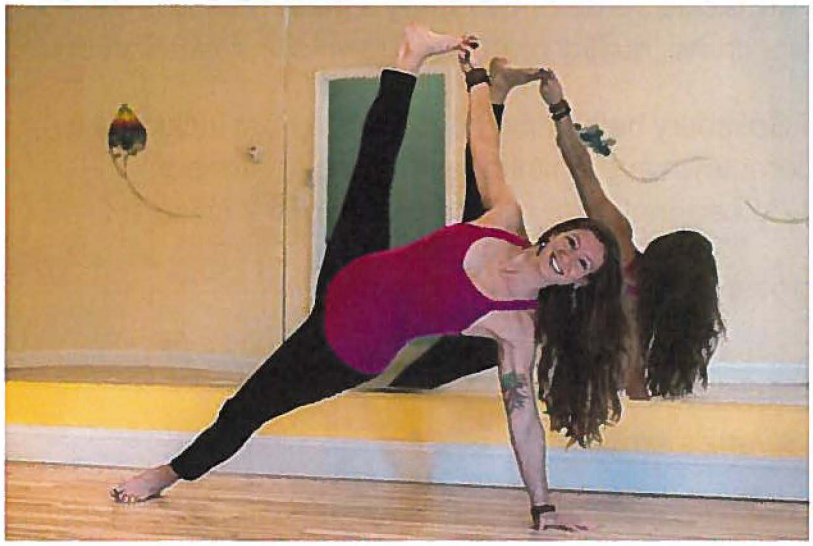

Jennifer Mitchell of Soul Yoga Studio is part of a new breed of downtown pioneers who hope to breathe new life into a historic but underutilized area. / Staff photo by Laura Emmons

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Today through next Sunday, The Daily Times is examining the future of the largest and most vital community on Delmarva: Salisbury. The goal is to start a conversation about what Salisbury is, what it wants to be and what it could be.**Today:** The big picture: Where the city stands and how it can move forward.**Coming Monday:** How does Salisbury turn around its brain drain and cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit?

Changes in Salisbury since 2000

** Adjusted for inflation to 2012 dollars*Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Changes in Salisbury since 2000

2000 2012 Population 23,743 30,913High school graduate or higher 76.40% 84.20%Bachelor's or higher 21.10% 27.70%Unemployed but in labor force 5.20% 9.10%Median household income $38,920* $36,674Families below poverty in last 12 months 16.50% 20.70%** Adjusted for inflation to 2012 dollars*Source: U.S. Census Bureau

SALISBURY — Looking for a new path in his architecture career about 10 years ago, Michael Swartz thought he had found it in Salisbury. Instead, it ran into a dead end.

"I saw this as the last undeveloped area accessible to the East Coast," he said. "I thought it was a place that could grow. It was a nice small town that was rural. It retained that character, but it had the attractions a coastal community should have."

The housing market crash six years ago halted Delmarva's construction industry in its tracks. Swartz found himself out of work with nowhere to ply his skills.

Approaching his late 40s, Swartz cobbled together a new livelihood. Today, he makes most of his living managing gift card stocks at retail stores. He supplements that income with freelance writing and modest advertising sales from a conservative blog he writes called "Monoblogue."

Like Swartz, Salisbury is making the best of a situation both of its own making and beyond its control.

How did life in Delmarva's largest city end up this way? What do people want it to be like in 2025? How does it get there?

This is the first in a weeklong series of Daily Times stories examining those questions and offering pathways to solutions. The stories will tackle some of Salisbury's most pressing issues — unemployment, breakdowns in leadership, crime, quality of life and downtown revitalization.

It will also introduce readers to the faces of Salisbury behind the headlines, a cast including a yoga instructor who took a chance on her hometown and an attorney helping to pioneer downtown living. One day is devoted simply to hearing from you, the voices of the citizenry.

The Crossroads of Delmarva stands at a crossroads. Let's get moving.

A larger, poorer community

This city has changed in many ways since Swartz's arrival.

Among the pockets of optimism:

• Annexations and incoming migration have boosted the population by 30 percent, outpacing the state of Maryland's growth by 20 percentage points.

• The share of adults with at least a high school diploma is rising.

• Serious crime has plummeted to its lowest level in more than a decade.

But every step forward seems to be accompanied by two steps back.

Economists predict the Salisbury metropolitan area will be among only a handful whose economy shrinks this year.

Wages have been stagnant nationwide, but Salisbury's median household buying power has actually fallen about $2,200 since 2000.

The number of residents living in poverty, meanwhile, has grown from one-out-of-every-four to one-out-of-every-three people.

Looking ahead to 2025 — enough time to get things done but not so much that forecasting devolves into pure speculation — these trend lines raise real concerns.

Of course, it doesn't have to be that way.

In recent years, demographers have been abuzz about the comeback of large cities. The 2010 census showed that for the first time since the 1920s, cities grew faster than suburbs.

But Ed Miller, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and director of its Center for the Small City, isn't buying it. He sees opportunities for places like Salisbury.

"People still in surveys say they want to live in smaller communities," Miller said. "The traffic is less, you can get around more and there's more parking."

Building a success story

Salisbury is no ordinary city of 30,000, though. It "feels bigger," said Jack Lenox, a planner who works for the city and Wicomico County.

For a century and a half, it has been the commercial hub of Delmarva, attracting people from scores of miles away to its shopping districts, health care facilities, factories and governmental portals. Today, the daytime population swells to 115,000, chamber of commerce officials say.

That phenomenon is what gives the city its gravitational force, its power to reel in amenities larger than what it could on its own.

There's a trauma center, a minor-league baseball team, a shopping mall, a bustling river port and regional airport, one of the few free zoos in the country, a growing public university, a community college and a museum holding the most comprehensive collection of wildfowl carvings in the world.

Pork in the Pork, hosted each spring at WinterPlace Park on the city's doorstep, is the largest sanctioned barbecue competition east of the Mississippi River. Wine and craft beer festivals also have been etched onto the growing events slate.

And for the past seven years, Salisbury has been home to the U.S. Specialty Sports Association's Fastpitch Eastern World Series, a three-week girls' softball tournament that hauls in about $12 million annually for the local economy. The event has mushroomed from 52 competing teams to more than 400.

"We have a lot of things a community of our size doesn't normally have," said Charles "Chip" Dashiell, an attorney specializing in estate planning as well as a civic jack-of-all-trades.

"We have what I think most communities want," he said. "I think it's just a matter of continuing to enhance all those things into a success story."

"Leisure options pale"

So far, so good. Now: the reality check.

Fodor's is one of the most respected publishers of travel information in the world. To view Salisbury through an outsider's eyes, look no further than its description of the city on its website.

"Barges still ply the slow-moving Wicomico River between the Bay and Salisbury, the Eastern Shore's second-largest port after Baltimore. This urban center is a hub of commercial activity in the region and the home of Salisbury University, but its leisure options pale compared to the excitement of nearby Ocean City.

"The tree-shaded waterfront draws bikers and shoppers," it continues. "Antiques shops and

galleries, along with some exemplary Victorian architecture, fill its downtown six blocks."

It's hard to imagine many readers getting excited at the promise of "barges," "leisure options (that) pale compared to the excitement" of Ocean City and six whole blocks of downtown development. It's also hard to imagine that excitement swelling once they learn it's not the second-largest port on the "Eastern Shore," as Fodor's confusingly states, but for all of Maryland.

What wouldn't get published in any travel guide about Salisbury could fill a book. In many ways, the city offers a microcosm of the challenges communities face across America.

Often, they are the sort of issues that lie beyond the scope of a local government's power: income inequality, outsourcing of jobs, federal spending on anti-poverty programs, immigration policy, the rising costs of college tuition and health care.

Swartz, the former architect, said he would like the state to reduce its tax burden, putting money back in people's pockets. An appreciable amount of that money probably would be spent in Salisbury, he added.

The cost of "everything is going up," he said. "It's getting harder for average people to afford a vacation. We are a vacation area for not just our state but for a good chunk of our region, and it drives our economy."

Short of lobbying Annapolis, though, there's not much Salisbury residents can do about that. As for city leaders?

"I already know what's going to come out of this visioning thing," Mayor Jim Ireton said, when interviewed in his City Hall office for this series. "It's jobs."

That conversation "needs to happen" with the area's U.S. House representative, Andy Harris, or the Democrats running to unseat him, the mayor said. "I'm the one you see about flushing your toilet."

What government can, can't do

But Ireton and the community are far from powerless.

For example, one of the mayor's goals, like many of his peers across America, is to keep the jobs the city has and attract a highly skilled workforce. But those two feats have been difficult to attain.

From 2007 to 2011, 485 more households with incomes of $75,000 or more moved out of Wicomico County than went the other direction. And the county lost 77 more people with graduate or professional degrees than it welcomed, according to U.S. census data.

His administration and the City Council can't create jobs, he said, but they can help set the stage for job growth. His initiatives have included nixing sewer-connection fees for developments downtown and in the city's enterprise zone, creating a free Wi-Fi zone downtown and easing the burden on developers for certain re-paving projects.

Any doubt about the mayor's commitment to revitalizing downtown may have been erased during the State of the City speech earlier this month in which he devoted half of the hour to the city's heart.

But not everyone appreciates all the attention downtown gets.

"You got all these businesses on Mount Hermon Road, and why aren't we downtown?" asked Dave Pfingst, owner of one of those businesses, the trophy shop Etch Art, at a recent business forum hosted by the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce.

"The reason people don't go to downtown is because they don't want to. And there's nothing government can do," he added.

Ireton believes it can help, at least indirectly. He sees unemployment and crime as firmly intertwined.

"When you talk about the jobs that left between 1980 and 2000, that explains the crime that was so high when I got here," said Ireton, who took office in 2009.

The police have seen reporting of the most serious crimes fall sharply since 2006, the city's peak. The agency recorded about 1,000 fewer incidents last year, settling at a little above 2,000. Impressively, all that happened while the overall population grew.

Despite those gains, Salisbury remains among the most violent places for cities of its size, according to FBI crime data. And at a Daily Times Neighborhood Town Hall meeting on March 12, the No. 1 concern of residents and panelists was saving city teens from the scourges of drugs and crime.

Diversity and disconnect

As Salisbury works to address its issues, not all stakeholders are at the table. In particular, the city suffers from an under-representation of people of color in leadership positions and on the public payroll.

The city's minority population has grown to nearly half of all residents. Yet no more than one African-American has ever served at any one time on the five-member City Council. And of the city's 400 employees, just one-sixth belong to a minority group.

Jackie Lisjuan, who helped found a Hispanic outreach effort called Rayo de Luz, recalls the attitude among Latinos when she settled here two decades ago. They were suspicious of neighbors, government and, most of all, the police.

"I saw a huge disconnect between the Spanish community and everything," Lisjuan recalled.

"There was a language barrier, and when there were issues, when Latinos were attacked, robbed and assaulted, they were afraid to call police. They didn't have identification or legal documentation, and they were afraid they would become a double victim."

Salisbury's Hispanic population soared from about 800 in 2000 to more than 2,100 in 2010, census figures show. Today, the city hosts a growing working-class Latino community. That has positive economic impact — and social and political value.

Knowing there are leaders and programs working to ease their transition and improve the quality of life has improved relations and makes the city a more attractive place to live, work and play, Lisjuan said.

"Nobody was rising up and saying, 'these are the issues happening in our community,' " she said. But it was not fair to say officials "are not solving the issues, when they don't know what the issues are."

"Eds and meds"

As for hope in the city's future, one Salisbury University researcher can describe it in two abbreviations: "Eds and meds."

Universities and hospitals "have become increasingly recognized as stable centers of employment and important contributors to urban economic development," wrote Mark de Socio of SU and Adam Parrillo of University of Wisconsin-Green Bay in a study currently under review for an academic journal.

The former classmates compared the two cities where they landed professorial jobs after realizing how much they had in common. Despite "different cultural and economic histories," both Salisbury and Green Bay find their "economic trajectories" converging toward a future shaped largely by higher education and health care, the study states.

In Salisbury, SU and PRMC play the roles of job creators and land developers. Since the 1990s, the nearly 20 percent growth in education and health services employment helped soften the blow from the 35 percent drop in manufacturing jobs.

In that context, de Socio, a geography professor, isn't surprised that SU and PRMC are at the forefront of a campaign to start a medical school in downtown Salisbury.

"Now we're starting to recognize the hospital and university as stakeholders," he said.

That hasn't always been the case, especially with SU. As the university began expanding its student population a decade ago, more students piled into homes originally built for single families. The city responded by passing some of the toughest rental codes in the state.

Students have their qualms, too. House parties have had a way of overflowing into the surrounding neighborhood, particularly during the annual War on the Shore lacrosse match. In 2012 and 2013, city police's response included pepper spray.

This year, the match was scheduled during SU's spring break, when all but the stoutest of fans would be out of town.

It's no wonder so many college students leave Salisbury once they get their diploma, Swartz

said. He would get back into his original profession if he could, but that is looking increasingly less likely.

"We have a good place for retirees but a dreadful place if you're just starting out," he said. "Retirees may have a lot of money, but they don't create a lot of jobs."

"The energy was here waiting"

SU and the hospital lie about a mile apart. More or less halfway between them in a strip mall off South Salisbury Boulevard, a fledgling business has evolved into a bridge between the city's aging downtown and the university, its past and its future.

Jennifer Mitchell, 35, opened Soul Yoga Studio in January 2013 in response to pleas from customers at her old studio in Lewes to open a location closer to their homes.

"When we looked here, everything fell together," she said. "It was like the energy was here waiting. When we opened the doors, it was just full."

She became so busy that she parted ways with her partner at her former studio.

Mitchell grew up in Salisbury, graduating from James M. Bennett High School. She left to study psychology at the University of South Carolina and got her master's at George Washington University.

But she found her calling in yoga and returned to the peninsula with "fresh eyes," she said.

"Before, I wasn't really realizing the beauty the Eastern Shore has to offer," Mitchell said. "Everywhere you go, there's access to the water and green space. And there's a year-round farmers market."

She teaches for-credit yoga classes at SU and hosts workshops during monthly 3rd Friday festivals. Her livelihood depends on Salisbury continuing to attract and retain young people, she said.

Each day, her students reach their arms as far as they can stretch in the same direction Salisbury's leaders would like to take the city: Up.