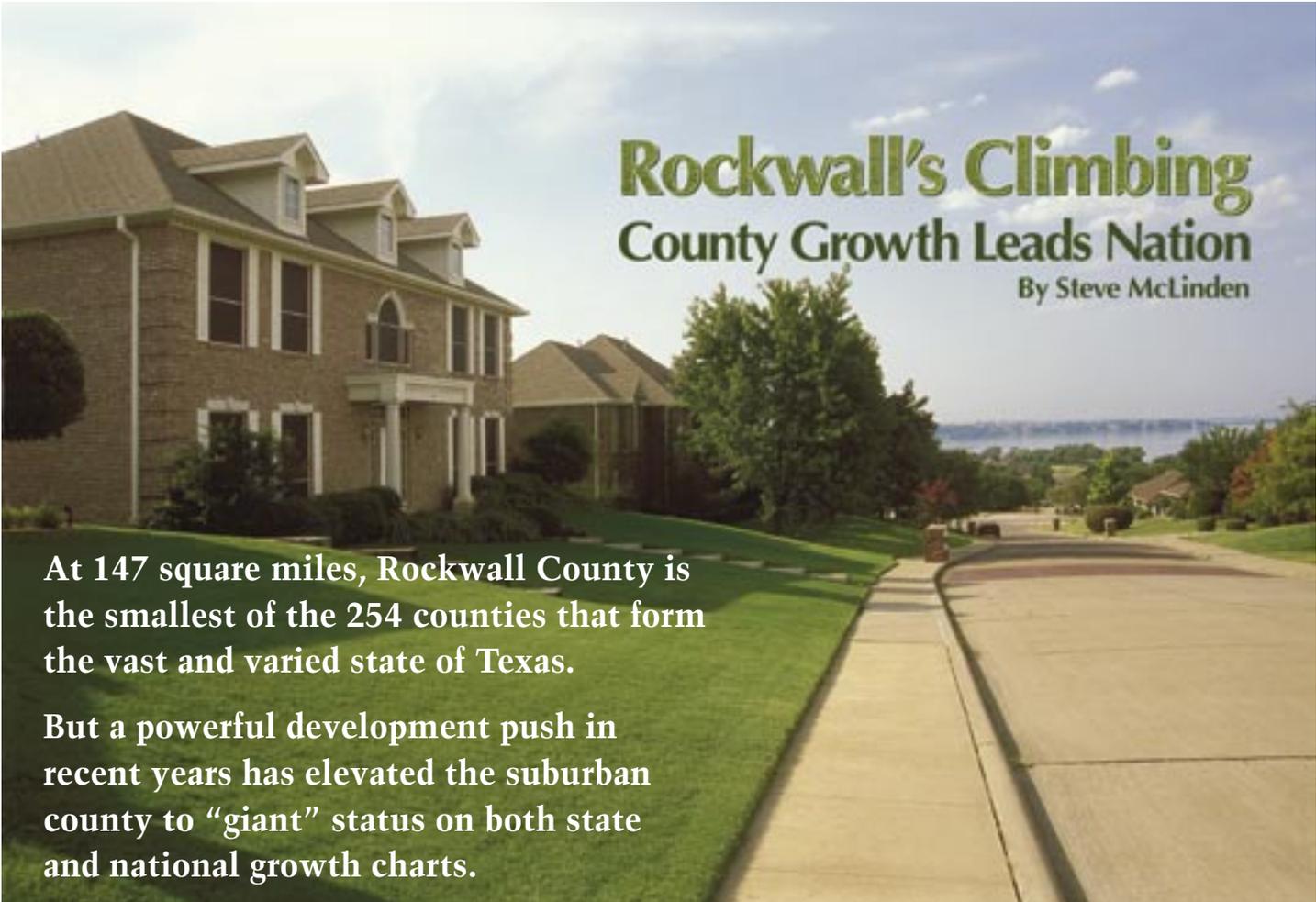


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## Rockwall's Climbing County Growth Leads Nation

By Steve McLinden

At 147 square miles, Rockwall County is the smallest of the 254 counties that form the vast and varied state of Texas.

But a powerful development push in recent years has elevated the suburban county to "giant" status on both state and national growth charts.

In a one-year span ending July 1, 2002, Rockwall County led all U.S. counties with a 7.9 percent population growth rate, more than seven times the national average of 1.1 percent, according to the Census Bureau. The county ranked fourth in the United States in the same category the previous year.

### County by the Lake

Rockwall County has flourished in grand fashion, decades after many neighboring population centers in North Texas were racked by acute growing pains. Its growth is buoyed by the popular Lake Ray Hubbard and by the relatively painless commute residents take down I-30 to nearby Dallas.

Two large mixed-use "power" centers, replete with trees and other flora, manicured green spaces and tasteful facades, have taken root in recent years in the City of Rockwall, 22 miles east of Dallas. Their offerings range from Lowe's Home Improvement Center to Pier 1 Imports, to OfficeMax, Starbucks and Petco.

Large grocery chains, a host of new service businesses and a mix of national chain restaurants including On the Border, Saltgrass and Chili's have sprung up, as have many independents, several of which offer live music and lakeside dining.

"A lot of people who live in areas east of the City of Rockwall are now stocking up here and dining here, instead of driving to Dallas," says Bob Wieneke, president of Rockwall County's Chamber of Commerce.

The spate of new development is serving the needs of a county population that has grown from about 29,200 in 1992 to nearly 50,860 in 2002, according to U.S. Census data.

The fast-filling Rockwall Technology Park, home to a Pilgrim's Pride data center, GE Digital Energy and others, is getting several new tenants this year. These add to an older industrial component and help diversify the city's swelling tax base.

Wieneke sees parallels between construction in the Rockwall area and that in the San Jose area of California. Rockwall is starting to attract similar clean, higher-tech industries. The city's well-groomed appearance and broad selection of housing, including enough high-end homes to attract corporate executives, make it appealing to such industries.

By any measure, area demographics are tough to beat. The 2002 median family household income in the City of Rockwall was almost \$70,000, while the median owner-occupied home was valued at \$134,000, according to the city.

### Rock-Solid Foundation

Rockwall County got its name following a water well dig in 1851, when settlers unearthed an underground rock-wall system they thought was man made. Geologists thought otherwise, believing the wall was the result of sand dikes that formed along the Balcones Fault line. Today, parts of the wall can be seen jutting above ground at some points.

The county had no large, navigable body of water until the East Fork of the Trinity River, which runs north to south on the western fringe of the county, was dammed to form Lake Ray Hubbard in the 1960s. The lake covers more than 13 percent of Rockwall County. It supplies water for Dallas and sparkling vistas for residents of Rockwall and neighboring Heath. According to Rockwall city officials, the lake once formed a natural barrier that kept growth and traffic at bay. This helped the county evolve at its own pace.

In 1960, there were actually fewer residents (5,870) living in Rockwall County than 70 years earlier in 1890 (5,970). Area historians attribute this to wars and shifting labor forces.

"In the not-too-distant past, the county was all cotton and cattle," Wieneke says. "As recently as 15 years ago, if you wanted anything other than bread and milk, you had to drive across the lake for it."

That has changed. From 2001 through 2002, the county added 7,800 residents, according to the Census Bureau. Meanwhile, the City of Rockwall has grown to about 20,000 and is expected to reach 53,000 by 2030.

Royce City, which grew 34 percent in that span, has just over 3,000 residents in 2003, while Fate recently topped the 1,000 mark. Mobile City and McLendon-Chisolm have fewer than 1,000 residents each.

## New County Economy

Although best known in residential circles for its sprawling lake homes, Rockwall County offers a selection of other housing and lifestyle choices, according to Lance Holland, owner of Regal Realtors. "Properties range from gated communities to waterfront lots to zero lot-line homes to horse farms," he says.

Most newer homes in Rockwall County range from \$170,000 to \$200,000, although a scattered few hover around \$1 million.

"But if you're looking in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range, you're going to have about 40 choices at any given time," says Holland.

Fate, in north central Rockwall County, rapidly grew from 500 residents in 2000 to about 1,100 currently, according to Gary Boren, city administrator. The town is in the process of kicking off a Texas-sized residential project. Woodcreek will



**UPPER-END HOUSING**  
*in view of Lake Ray Hubbard (previous page) is plentiful in Rockwall County, but castles for those with more moderate incomes can be found as well. Widening of the Hwy. 66 bridge over the lake (left) is just one testament to the county's tremendous growth.*

Because Rockwall County was largely insulated from the frenetic North Texas growth binges of the 1970s and 1980s, officials had the luxury of learning from other area cities. Some suffer from an imbalance of small homes that do not produce enough tax revenue to support the city services and streets their owners need.

"We had the great benefit of seeing what worked well and what didn't," says Gary Martin, vice president of the Rockwall Economic Development Corp.'s board of directors.

Rockwall County, which is sandwiched between Hunt, Collin and Dallas counties, is also home to the smaller burghs of Fate, McLendon-Chisolm, Mobile City and Royce City.

Heath, which abuts the lake, grew 96 percent from 1990 to 2000, from 2,100 to 4,100 residents, according to the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG).

be one of the largest planned developments in the state, with 1,445 acres being rezoned from agricultural to residential use.

Noted Texas investor Lamar Hunt bought most of the property in the 1970s and has parceled it off in recent years, Boren says. ERD/Fate Development Corp. and Provident Realty are spearheading the development. Fate, in which many new homes sell for around \$180,000, is platting 1,218 homes in Woodcreek.

"The real growth is yet to come," remarks Boren. "It's going to be wild out here."

In Heath, lake frontage "is pretty well developed out, except for a few strips," says George Costan, the city's public works supervisor. "With the exception of some sites around Buffalo Creek Golf Course, all we have left is acreage through the middle of town that is zoned for agriculture."



*THE OLD TOWN SQUARE in the City of Rockwall with its shops and galleries is key to a community culture that attracts clean, high-tech industries.*

## Growing Smartly

Rockwall County has garnered national attention since its high-growth honor was announced in the spring.

Recently, the City of Rockwall enacted a few "smart-growth" measures to keep development in check. In June, the Rockwall City Council amended the city's noise ordinance to prohibit construction on Sunday and to limit it on weekdays and Saturday. And at press time, a moratorium on rezoning agricultural land in Rockwall for other uses remained in effect.

At build-out, Rockwall County could total about 200,000 residents, county officials say. NCTCOG estimates the county population will grow to about 145,000 by 2030. The cities are trying to stay a step ahead to prevent strain on basic services such as schools and roads.

Heath, which Costan says is a whopping 99 percent residential, plans a \$40 million high school that will be shared with the City of Rockwall. The Rockwall Independent School District has acquired land on the north side of town for a third local high school. Two more will eventually be needed in the district, which includes most of Rockwall County, Wieneke says.

Two major road projects that will help carry traffic more efficiently through the county's population centers were recently completed. The Highway 66 bridge, the only alternative to the I-30 bridge across Lake Ray Hubbard to Rockwall County, has been expanded from one to three lanes each way. Just north of I-30, the bridge serves as a crucial detour route in the event that the interstate bridge is closed. Ridge Road, a major north-south artery through the county, has been improved and widened also.

Local voters opted out of extending the George Bush Turnpike through Rockwall County from the northern part of the Metroplex. It will run through neighboring Rowlett instead, providing a more streamlined connection with North Dallas, says Wieneke.

The city's high-tech, 223-acre Rockwall Technology Park, at Hwy. 276 and FM 549, has ample room for expansion. Lots range from three to 60 acres and are priced at 75 cents to \$1.75 per square foot, according to the Rockwall Economic Development Corp. EZ-FLO International and Col Met, Inc., will open there later this year.

Walton Gilpin, president of one of the center's current tenants, GE Digital Energy, calls the Rockwall area "a good place to do business, with a lot of positive, evolving growth." Gilpin cites "good incentives," a lack of traffic problems and the park's well-maintained roads as drawing points.

## Coming Down the Pike

Rockwall County officials are turning cartwheels over The Harbor, a planned lakefront entertainment venue that is expected to feature a 160-room hotel, 12-screen theater, a light-house, a kids' "spray park" with numerous fountains and an area for outdoor concerts. Ground is expected to be broken on the 33-acre complex south of I-30 next year, with completion expected in early 2006.

Area residents place a high priority on recreational and cultural pursuits. The City of Rockwall has three golf courses, four marinas, three public boat ramps, two yacht clubs and cohosts Dallas Raceweek, a nationally known regatta, each summer.

*Officials are working hard to stay a step ahead of growth to prevent strain on basic services such as schools and roads. The county's population is predicted to grow to 145,000 by 2030.*

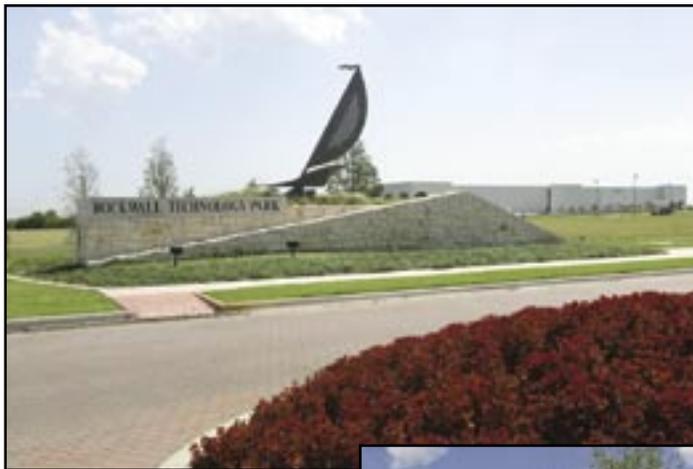
A 10,000-square-foot lake-side Larry North Fitness Club opened in Rockwall Harbor Phase II in June. Exercise and diet guru North says the club is the most attractive he has built, with "great views of the lake and decor that blends New York hip and Miami chic."

Corey Duhon, leasing agent for a new speculative strip center under construction on I-30 next to Rockwall's water tower, says the area "has good population density and good income." His firm, Shafer Property Co., leased all the outparcels to the successful Wal-Mart Supercenter on I-30 to businesses such as Car Toys and Mattress Giant. Shafer's planned 16,000-square-foot center, which will be inhabited by Bank One and several service businesses, was almost fully leased before ground was broken, he said.

"It's a great community," Duhon says. "And the interstate itself is like having a billboard for your business."

Area arts offerings include the Rockwall Community Playhouse, the Hubbard Chamber Music Series, a movie complex and arts festivals. Quaint antique shops and galleries can be found near the old town square in central Rockwall, where a \$2.5 million refurbishment of the town's historic courthouse now serves as a centerpiece. A new city hall sits a few blocks away on Goliad Street.

"We are trying to preserve our culture and our old downtown, plus we are trying to create other urban-style environments that are more like villages, with more walkability," said Robert Lacroix, director of community development for the City of Rockwall.



**THE ROCKWALL TECHNOLOGY PARK** (left) is home to systems engineering firm ComCept, Inc. (below).



"Rockwall does not want to be labeled a bedroom community," Lacroix states. "It wants to be distinctive, self-sufficient and independent." 📌

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## Rockwall County by the Numbers

### Single-Family Building Permits

Year	Dwelling Units	Average Value per Unit
1992	167	\$129,300
1993	206	141,600
1994	251	150,200
1995	247	172,800
1996	410	158,800
1997	391	154,600
1998	495	169,200
1999	761	165,900
2000	955	194,400
2001	1,267	171,000
2002	1,224	171,000

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Census and Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University

### Employment

Year	Employment		Unemployment Rate
	Total	Percent Change From One Year Ago	
1992	15,329	5.7	5.0
1993	16,010	4.4	4.0
1994	17,121	6.9	3.3
1995	17,930	4.7	3.2
1996	18,768	4.7	2.8
1997	19,766	5.3	2.7
1998	20,826	5.4	2.1
1999	22,181	6.5	2.1
2000	23,548	6.2	2.0
2001	25,147	6.8	3.4
2002	24,700	-1.8	5.4

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Census and Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University



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