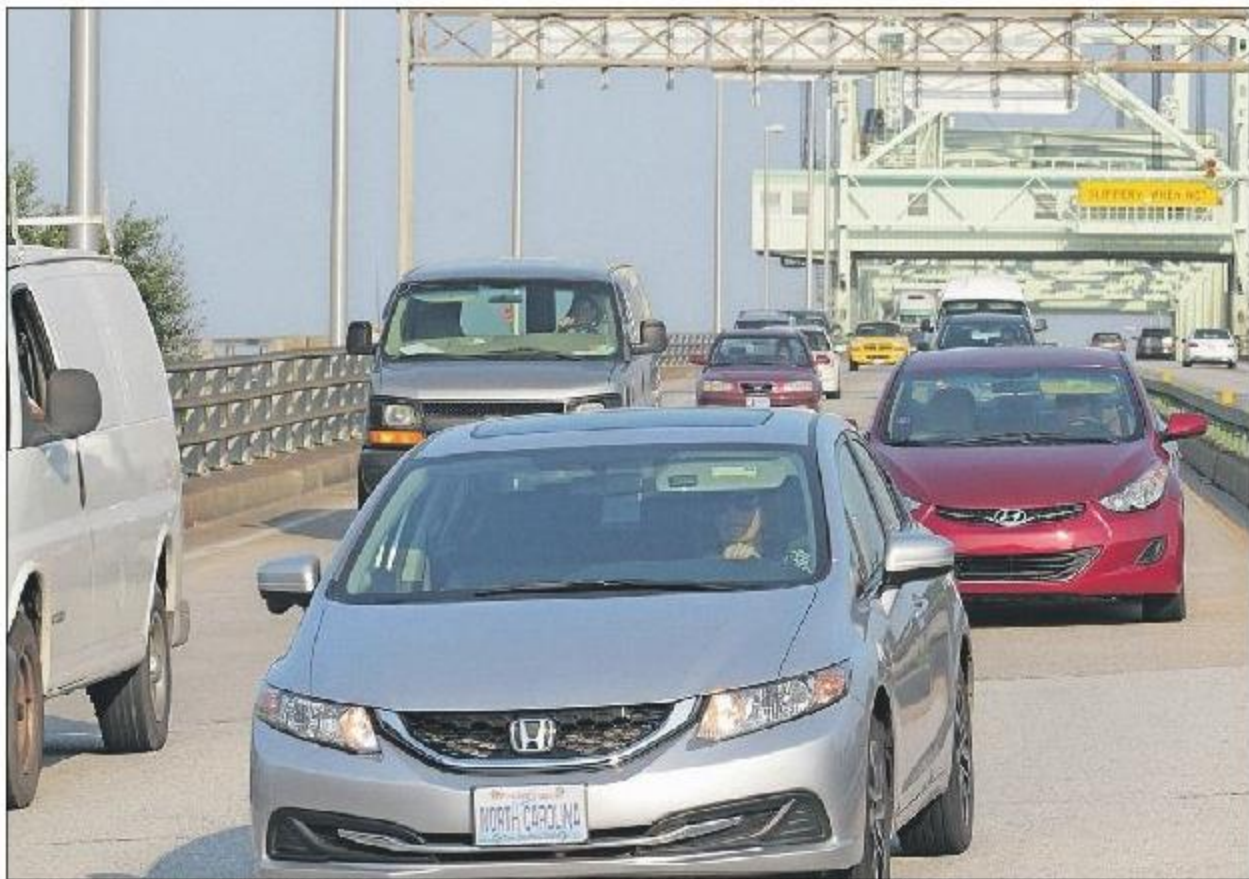


THE LONG WAY HOME



Morning rush-hour traffic floods the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge recently as commuters come from Brunswick County into New Hanover County. MATT MILLER/STARNEWS

Jobs, pay drive workers across county lines

A quarter of local workforce commutes to New Hanover

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

Condensation is still beaded on the car windows when Lori Burton leaves her house, and fog rests heavy in the wetlands just off U.S. 17 in Leland.

It's 6:56 a.m.

It's time for her to go to work.

Burton is among the 10,500 Brunswick County residents — or a quarter of that county's workforce — who make a living in New Hanover County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. New Hanover also has

Where we work

Pender County:

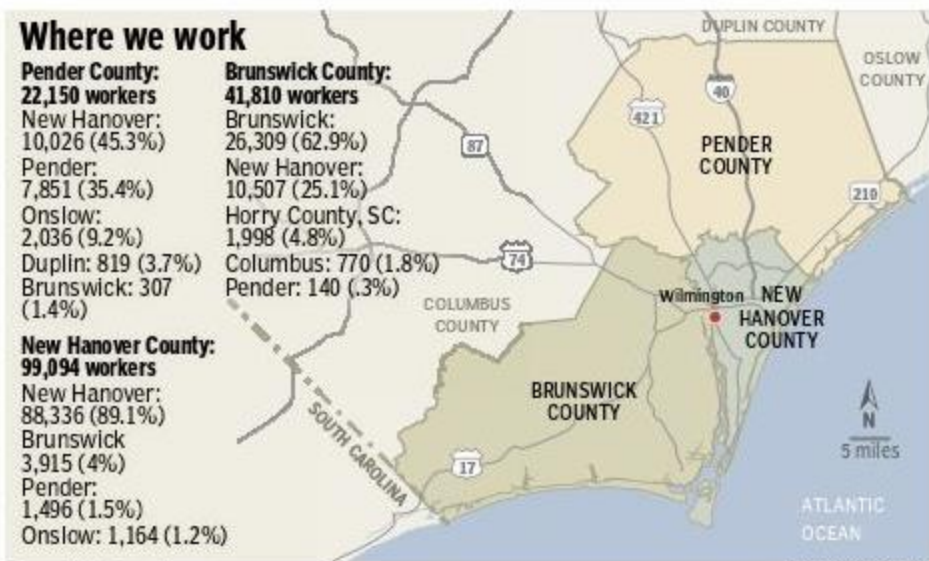
22,150 workers
New Hanover: 10,026 (45.3%)
Pender: 7,851 (35.4%)
Onslow: 2,036 (9.2%)
Duplin: 819 (3.7%)
Brunswick: 307 (1.4%)

New Hanover County:

99,094 workers
New Hanover: 88,336 (89.1%)
Brunswick: 3,915 (4%)
Pender: 1,496 (1.5%)
Onslow: 1,164 (1.2%)

Brunswick County:

41,810 workers
Brunswick: 26,309 (62.9%)
New Hanover: 10,507 (25.1%)
Horry County, SC: 1,998 (4.8%)
Columbus: 770 (1.8%)
Pender: 140 (.3%)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

GATEHOUSE MEDIA

more employees from Pender County than Pender does, with 10,000 people driving I-40 and U.S. 421 south every day.

"Any metropolitan area eventually spreads outwards, whether

it's up toward Porter's Neck or down to Brunswick County," said Jim Goodman, the president-elect of the Brunswick County Association of Realtors.

SEE COMMUTERS, A5

On the web

Lori Burton talks about living in Brunswick County and working in New Hanover County in a video at StarNewsOnline.com

COMMUTERS

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There is, he added, more space for builders to add amenities as they move away from Wilmington's urban center.

Extra space for their two large dogs is one reason Burton and her husband, Mike, consciously chose Brunswick County, the longer drive and lower taxes over New Hanover County.

"We heard Brunswick was a little bit cheaper and we did get more land, more house for our money," Burton said Friday morning. "And we like being out here away from the craziness of Downtown and all that."

Burton is speaking while driving to her job at ABRA Auto Body on Market Street.

When the Burtons moved to North Carolina in 2001, they spent about six months in Monkey Junction before settling in the Hunters Ridge development.

Nevertheless, the couple has always worked in New Hanover.

"We've tried several times to find work over here," Burton said, "but the pay scale's just not the same is what we're finding, so we've stayed and gotten used to our commute."

According to U.S.

Census Bureau data, New Hanover's median household income is \$49,835. That is slightly higher than Brunswick County's \$46,438 and Pender County's \$44,524.

Shops and restaurants downtown are boosted by some of those workers, said Ed Wolverton, the president and CEO of Wilmington Downtown Inc.

"When you think in a traditional sense of office workers in particular, they have a pretty big impact on our restaurant sector in the daytime," he said.

Many Brunswick County — and specifically northern Brunswick County — residents relocated from elsewhere, Wolverton added. What might seem like a lengthy commute to long-term residents isn't as stressful for someone moving from Washington, D.C., or Charlotte.

"If you're coming from a place where you're commuting an hour and you came here and you're commuting 20 minutes, that's a net gain," he said.

Driving on the under-construction Eagles Island Causeway and crossing the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge aren't enough to deter people like the Burtons from choosing to live in Leland, said Brenda Bozeman, Leland's mayor and a local real estate agent.

"Most people have gotten their schedules to a point where they don't get stuck in (traffic) unless something does happen like a wreck," Bozeman said.

The Burtons are among those who have been able to shift their schedules. Lori Burton was consistently late for work last fall, shortly after construction began on the Causeway.

"It was taking us 45, 50 minutes to get to work," she said.

To fix the problem, she asked her manager if she could begin and end her day earlier, timing the drive so she'd miss the worst traffic on both ends.

"You're gonna laugh," Burton said as she pulled to a stop at Third and Market streets in Wilmington, letting a car with blue and red panels slide in front of her, "but I do see the same people every morning."

She pointed to the car she'd let in.

"I recognize this car," she said. "He's always in a hurry. Let him go. I just know."

Five minutes later, Burton pulls into ABRA's driveway.

It's about 7:25 a.m.

Her day is underway.

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