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What does future hold for Walmart's backyard?

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ROGERS, Arkansas – The area around the Walmart corporate headquarters has been on quite the ride for the past two decades, but many are wondering where the growth will come in the next 20 years.

“Before Walmart’s expansion this was hillbilly country. But there is only so much expansion that one company can bring to the area, even one as large as Walmart,” said Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas.

Central to the Walmart boom have been the jobs not just from the company itself, but from 1,200 Walmart suppliers — including Procter & Gamble to Pepsi and Nestle, and many more — that have opened an office here to be closer to the retail giant.

All told those suppliers employ more than 5,400 people in the area. Trucking firm JB Hunt also has its headquarters in the area, as does Tyson Foods. From 2000 to 2008, the population of Benton County grew by nearly 37 percent, to nearly 210,000, according to the Census Bureau.

Recruiting firm Cameron Smith & Associates has persuaded more than 300 suppliers to set up shop in the area.

“Suppliers that have moved here have found that it really moves the needle for them,” said company president Cameron Smith. “Once buyers at Walmart see you face to face around here, they know that you’re there for them when they need you.”

Every year Smith runs free seminars at the University of Arkansas in nearby Fayetteville on how to break into the Walmart supplier world, like offering to do an unpaid internship.

“Many of the suppliers here can’t afford to spend a lot of money on interns, but if you work for them for free in return for training that can make a lot of difference,” he said. “If I receive an application from someone who did an \$18 an hour internship and one from someone who worked for free, I’d most likely go for the latter one.”

The central question for Bentonville is how Walmart will manage its future operations. Last week the company said it was eliminating 60 positions from its international division, moving some jobs from headquarters to far-flung offices around the world. Some say this is a wake-up call for a community



Author Profile

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Nick Carey is a Chicago-based, British-born journalist who has covered everything from the near-collapse of the Big Three automakers to the U.S. housing crisis. Nick is currently on general assignment, reporting on the human impact of the recession. He previously spent ten years working in central and eastern Europe.

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