

NORTH BRUNSWICK NBM MAGAZINE

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The Roger Bacon Academy Scores Big

An Afternoon at
Orton Plantation

The New
Wilmington Convention Center

North Brunswick's
"Biggest Loser"



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- Jack Batson, Mayor of Belville
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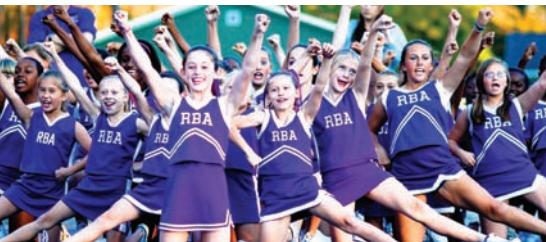


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Jack Batson

MAYOR OF BELVILLE

A MAN OF ACTION

EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS IS PART 4
OF OUR SIX-SERIES FOCUS ON
THE MAYORS OF NORTHERN
BRUNSWICK COUNTY.

STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOGAN WALLACE

JUST one year ago, northern Brunswick County stood divided, with Belville, Leland, Navassa, Northwest and Sandy Creek each looking out for their own interests. Now the five towns, and their five mayors, are exemplifying the idea of community by working together and developing new ways to think, respond and thrive as separate towns with common goals. Jack Batson, only a year into his inaugural term as mayor of Belville, is to thank for the newfound unity and cooperation among the mayors and towns that make up northern Brunswick County.

"Right after my election, I decided that something had to change," says Batson. "I got on the phone and spoke with [Leland mayor] Walter [Futch] about getting together with the other local mayors and figuring out how we could work together. The other mayors agreed and we started meeting. No agendas, no official records, just five guys in a room helping one another out."

So far, the results of their meetings have been impressive. They approached the Department of Transportation (DOT) as a unified front with a common plan for alleviating the traffic congestion on Highways 17/74/76, and the DOT responded with plans (a copy of which hangs in the Belville Town Hall meeting room) and guarantees of future roadwork. The mayors' plans for upgrading sewer services in the northern end of the county are moving forward, and their collaboration is having an impact around the county.

News of their cooperation spread, and Batson reports that the original five mayors have started meeting with many of their counterparts from the southern part of Brunswick County.

"We've got nearly 20 mayors working together now," says Batson. "We represent an impressive number of people and we think our voice will be even louder now."

The meetings have had smaller but no less important impacts, too. Batson and Futch are working to codify building ordinances and code standards so the neighboring, and at times intertwined, towns can better serve both of their citizenries.

"The way Belville and Leland are situated, we have neighbors in the same development with different building codes and town ordinances," says Batson. "It's difficult for homeowners and for residential and commercial developers to keep track of which codes apply when. With a common code, we can foster more sustainable growth in the area."

More sustainable growth is one of the critical factors to the long-term economic and cultural success of Belville and its end of the county. Currently, plans for a one-million-square-foot downtown waterfront development sit on the drawing board. The new downtown will feature residential units above retail, restaurant and commercial spaces and will be architecturally and atmospherically reminiscent of Wilmington's Front Street. Plans also include an elaborate riverfront promenade, docks and an abundance of open spaces and parks. Batson sees the downtown development as an investment in the future of Belville and Brunswick County.

"With a vibrant downtown on the Brunswick River, people will have more reasons to stay on this side of the bridge [to Wilmington]," says Batson. "I imagine that with the restaurants and shops that will populate our downtown, we'll draw people over the bridge to come into Belville to shop and eat."

Batson's successes as a freshman mayor don't stop at the growing cooperation between the mayors or the long-term vision of the downtown development; he's also concerned with the town's immediate future. One of the planks in his platform during the mayoral race was the reduction of taxes. While many thought a tax decrease would hamper the town's finances, he sought to prove them wrong — and prove them wrong he did. His tax cuts, along with other budgetary changes, resulted in a surplus that has been added to the town's fund balance.

"When I came into office, I changed the structure of the town government," Batson says. "We moved from a town manager driven manager/council government to the more familiar mayor/council form. We replaced our town manager with a town administrator and brought in several new staff members, injecting town hall with new ideas and enthusiasm for what we could do."

Sweeping changes like the ones to Belville's governance wouldn't be possible with a fractured town council; fortunately, the council shared Batson's vision for the town and followed his lead.

"I feel like we were able to work together to better the town, all of the town," Batson says.

Batson and the town council have made a concerted effort to involve as many of Belville's citizens as possible in a variety of committees, panels and study groups. Drawing on the diverse backgrounds of citizens from every corner of Belville gives voices to those who would otherwise go unheard and ensures that ideas and suggestions don't fall on deaf ears, as Batson believes they once did.

Batson lives in Olde Towne, which was forcibly annexed by Belville a few years back. Many of the residents didn't want the annexation and questioned its necessity. Complaints from



Above: Some of the folks who run the Town of Belville include Public Works Technician Pat Walsh, Mayor Jack Batson, Administrative Assistant April Willetts and Town Administrator Athina Williams.

Batson and his neighbors were ignored by the town council before and after they were drawn into Belville, so he decided to do something about it. Batson ran for a

seat on the council and won. He served for four years before he and a pair of like-minded Olde Towne residents allied and pushed for a louder voice in the town's government. Batson led the trio into the next election, seeking the mayor's seat while his two allies sought seats on the town council. They all won.

"We didn't feel that Olde Towne was being represented or even listened to, so we changed that," says Batson. "I want to ensure that Belville's citizens don't have that feeling. I want to ensure that everyone has a voice and that everyone's voice will be heard, whether you've lived in your home for four generations or four months."

Batson falls into the category of folks who have a long history in the area. For more than 200 years eight generations of his family have farmed the same land near Topsail Sound. His father and grandfather grew peanuts and corn but never North Carolina's king crop — tobacco.

"Granddaddy said 'If you can't eat it, I don't grow it,' and he never did," Batson recalls.

Growing up on a family farm, with many of his relatives living within a mile or so of his home, Batson learned a lot about leadership and orderly management by watching his

father, grandfather and uncles work the land. The lessons he learned on the farm taught him to be driven, successful, kind and honorable. He says the lessons have “served me well through my life.”

When Batson was a child, his father grew dissatisfied with the Pender County schools, so he rented a home in Wilmington for Batson and his mother. Batson lived and attended school in Wilmington but returned to the Topsail home for holidays and during the summer.

“I knew I didn’t want to be a farmer and I showed a knack for chemistry in high school, so that’s what I studied in college,” Batson says.

Batson earned a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry from the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and a Master of Science in Chemical Engineering from University of Tennessee in Knoxville. His love for the area brought him back and he soon found himself working for DuPont, but, surprisingly, not doing much chemical engineering. At

DuPont he worked extensively with ensuring that their facilities, products and processes met the International Organization for Standardization’s (ISO) standards.

Like many of his coworkers, Batson moved into Olde

Towne, well before Belville, Leland or any of the surrounding towns had incorporated. He remembers the area being quite sleepy and quite rural for most of his life here.

“My father used to rent and farm the field where Belville Elementary School stands now,” he says. “We used to joke that the kids could play ball in the middle of [Route] 133 and be fine. Now that’s all changed. Belville and Leland, we’ve grown into towns and we’re still growing.”

Batson says he and the other mayors are looking to the future to ensure the area thrives long after they’re gone.

“I hope in years to come, our residents have everything they want and need right here in Brunswick County,” Batson says. ■



Above: Mayor Jack Batson speaks to a group at Town Hall about a proposed transportation project.

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