

Pickens County horse owners showing their presence at local cash registers, businesses

“Everybody lives in Pickens County because they want to look out their window and see a horse standing there in front of the mountains,” says Equestrian Center owner Andy Robb.

As Georgia gains prominence as a leading horse farm state, Pickens County is showing signs it will be an important staging ground in what could become a thriving market in the near future.

County agent Rick Jasperse says that while there has not been an explosion in the presence of horses grazing throughout the county, there has been a steady increase in recent years.

It is the animals’ economic effects, and the ability to make a living off horses through boarding or lessons, that are just now making a noticeable presence in Pickens.

Local residents as well as those from other areas seeking space for horses they own or plan to own, have shown a



significantly growing interest in land for pastures in Pickens.

“We’ve had a lot of calls from people who are clearing land for horses,” said Jasperse.

There are no definitive statistics on numbers of horses or acres of horse pastureland in the county. However, Jasperse estimates there are about 4,000 equines in Pickens.

Statewide, the University of Georgia’s Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development says the horse industry has an estimated value of almost \$248 million, compared to less than \$44 million in 1998.

Many of those who are closely involved with horses — both the economic and pleasure aspects — in Pickens predict the county will soon be one of Georgia’s leaders in the market catering to horse owners.

“Pickens County will probably be a premier horse county in about five years,” said Shirley Fargason, stable master at Bent Tree Stables, a 12-month boarding facility. She said in 2000 the stables only boarded five horses, and now there are over 20.

The Bent Tree Saddle Club, probably the most well-established organization in

getting maxed out with development. Land has become so expensive that fewer people can afford to buy the minimum five to ten acre tracts needed for their pets.

Cheap land may be getting more and more rare, but the interest in horseback riding will continue to grow. People have started moving their horses further from the suburbs, to places like Pickens, where more land is available at lower prices.

Fargason said the growing local interest in horses is directly related to the vast growth in the metropolitan Atlanta area. “As the growth comes up Highway 75 and 575, you’re going to see more horse people coming here,” she said.

Even if they don’t own land, people often drive 40 or 50 miles several times a week to see their horses which they keep at boarding facilities in Pickens.

Andy Robb planned his facility in East Pickens with future growth in mind. His stables are equipped with state of the art amenities. He has the only indoor arena in Pickens, which he modeled after those used for professional competitions.

Clearly, horses are not new to Pickens. Wherever there is a rural or country atmosphere, horses can be found.

Agriculture recommends 2.5 acres per horse), but also fertilizer, tack, feed, hay, a barn, veterinarian and horse shoeing services, and lessons for those who are new to the sport.

The unique thing about the money spent on and for horses, says Rick Jasperse, is that it generally stays in the community and recirculates.

The folks at Hinton Milling Company can testify to this as well as anyone. Tony Kellogg, who has worked at Hinton Milling almost ten years, said their horse-related business has grown tremendously, and it has doubled in the past two years alone.

“It’s probably the biggest part of our business now,” he said.

The store has expanded its horse-related products to meet the growing demand. Sales of everything from tack, seed, and fertilizer, to fencing, pens, and building materials for stalls have grown at the west-end supply store.

And Kellogg confirmed that a lot of the new business is from people moving from other parts of the state. “We see about five new customers every week,” he said. “If they have at least two acres, they want at least one horse.”

But the combination of urban sprawl

Pickens County devoted to horseback riding, has seen tremendous growth in membership since it was founded in 1990. Rich Vigue, who has been a member since the beginning, said the club has “doubled in size the last few years.”

He also predicts that Pickens County will eventually look like Highway 372 from Ball Ground to Alpharetta, where horse farms and facilities line the road.

While horses have always been a part of life in Pickens, the majority of new owners are coming from areas to the south of Pickens, seeking cheaper land.

The rise of the county’s status as a desirable place to own, ride, and raise horses is due to the natural course of both the growing horse industry and urban sprawl.

Horse farms and money-making facilities are “radiating outwards” from their more traditional locations in Fulton and Cherokee counties, says Andy Robb, owner of North Star Equestrian Center.

Those areas, which have always been known as Georgia’s horse country, are

Hugh Tatum, who has lived in Tate all his life, has owned horses for 60 years. It has been just a hobby for him for most of that time, but he was a kid when farmers like his dad used horses to plow the fields.

He said in the 1950s local people started buying horses for the pleasure of horseback riding. “We used to ride everywhere,” Tatum said.

Now the interest has grown so much that the business aspect of horses, and their impact on the economy are just starting to become evident in Pickens, even if it is not yet a booming industry.

According to the Georgia Department of Agriculture, there are seven state-licensed horse boarding facilities in Pickens. Some of these, including Bent Tree Stables and North Star, also offer lessons, trail rides, and horse training.

Anyone who owns even one horse for their own use is making a sizable investment that only gets bigger. “The cheapest thing about buying a horse is buying a horse,” said Robb.

Not only do you need several acres of pastureland (the U.S. Department of

and horse industry patterns indicate that the expected influx of horse activity may be short lived.

Already land prices in Pickens are getting less affordable. Real estate broker Tom Lindsey says a lot of people come to Pickens interested in buying smaller tracts of pastureland for their horses, but become disappointed when they see the prices.

“The majority of the county is still wooded, and the good pastureland is either not for sale or it’s priced too high,” said Lindsey. In Fulton and Cherokee, it is noteworthy that older horse farms are being subdivided for houses.

Thus the same factors that are pushing horse farms up to Pickens may cause them to eventually fade further to the north.

Then again, others say the Pickens residents’ affinity for the mountains and open space will keep the horses and riding areas undisturbed.

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