

Case Study: Weatherford, Texas, USA

Weatherford is a city of approximately 29,000 people in north central Texas and is the county seat for Parker County. Weatherford is located about 25 miles west of Fort Worth and is included in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan Area, though it culturally and economically remains more rural in character. In the past Weatherford was considered ‘cowboy’ country, with a strong tradition in ranching and a history of serving as a setting-off point for those heading west. More recently, Weatherford has emerged as a major center for the breeding and training of cutting horses. The city has a small manufacturing industrial base, has experienced the swings in fortunes of oil and natural gas resource industries, and has a growing – though still relatively small – retail sector. While the city loses some of its resident consumer spending to Fort Worth, it benefits from a large hinterland with those from more remote places coming to shop and dine in Weatherford.



Texas horse riders. Photo credit: David Mark

Importantly, Weatherford sits on two interstate highways (I20 and I30) and this in turn offers opportunities and challenges for the city. On a positive note, relatively low land costs, highway accessibility, and proximity to a major population center makes Weatherford an attractive location for logistics services and functions. Weatherford has also grown as commuters have moved in the city creating strong demand for housing,

shopping and service, but also raising the specter of Weatherford becoming just another dormitory suburb within a major metropolitan region. Interestingly, though there have been housing developments in other communities along the I20/I30 corridor towards Fort Worth, Weatherford has remained competitive for commuters. Since the 2010 Census, through 2017, the population of Weatherford has increased about 20 percent.

Between 2013 and 2017, the city’s job count increased about 8 percent, rising to 14,270 with the largest sectors in the services economy (health and social services, 18%; retail trade, 16%; accommodation and food services, 15%; and (private) education services 14%). Even with locational and infrastructure advantages, manufacturing, wholesale trade, and transportation industries combine for less than 7 percent of total employment. In 2013, 72.6 percent of all local residents worked outside the city which rose to 79 percent just four years later. Local economic development strategies focused on retail sales appear successful. As noted, from 2010 to 2017 the population increased by 20 percent,

but taxable retail sales in the city increased by 51 percent. The structure of taxes in Texas makes retail trade development a key component of developing sustainable local government revenues.

Growth has generated new challenges: not all members of the community – or indeed all leaders – have been willing to embrace change. Some have resisted attempts to encourage development, while others recognize that growth is inevitable and their only options is to guide that process of change and get the best possible outcome. As one long term resident noted, Weatherford has long been acknowledged as a place with great prospects ‘but I just don’t want it to be known as the town that dies with great potential!’

Weatherford has recognized the risks confronting it and is planning for a more prosperous future, that pays respect to the city’s heritage. It is:

- Developing new industrial and residential zones along the interstate to allow existing businesses to grow and attract new facilities.
- Highlighting events and attractions, such as the Peach Festival, to support tourism and as amenities for residents;
- Redeveloping its historic downtown district by directing traffic away from the historic commercial hub and reintroducing rail into the city as a part of the overall commuter transport effort; and
- Engaging with area leaders since 2017 in a joint Weatherford/Park County economic development plan that also includes other, smaller cities in the county. While there remain individual (city and county level) economic development organizations, there is broad agreement on cooperation to enhance the county’s competitive positions. The joint effort seeks to focus on light industrial and commercial/retail industries.

Importantly, the solution for Weatherford doesn’t seem to be simply on one set of strategies or another. Nor does it reside solely in one area of the city administration or another. To build the best possible future it can have, Weatherford needs a mix of strategies that includes urban planning, the traditional tools of economic development in business attraction and retention, infrastructure provision, education and training and community building.