



Tim Will saw the potential for Farmers Fresh Market in Rutherford County.

Farm to Web to Table

Broadband is transforming this county's economy, one small farm at a time.

BY JAMIE COLE

TIM WILL'S FIRST IMPRESSION of Rutherford County, N.C., was from a scene in the film *Last of the Mohicans*. When he saw the part where a character scattered ashes from the side of a cliff in a beautiful mountain range, "I told my wife, 'I want to be buried there, too,'" he says.

Will had been a telecom specialist, both in the Army and the private sector. He was teaching history in Miami when he and his wife decided to make the move to Rutherford County in 2006. They found a 45-acre farm just 3 miles from the cliff where the film was shot. He was thrilled with the location, less so with the amenities.

"I started interviewing with schools and found that none of them had broadband Internet," says Will. "Keep in mind, this was just a few years ago." The economy in the county was shot, too. This was ground zero for the domestic collapse and globalization of the textile industry, which had floated Rutherford County's fortunes since the 1930s, when 100,000-plus acres of cotton were farmed within its borders. In the middle of the 2000s, the county had the highest unemployment in the state.

Will walked into Foothills Connect, the business and technology center in the county seat of Rutherfordton, hoping to sign up for broadband. At the time, Foothills Connect was an advocacy group bent on bringing broadband to the county by writing grants and raising money. When Will told them about his background, "they pretty much hired me on the spot," he says. He's now the group's executive director.

Will, whose formal education is in city and regional planning, learned about sustainable agriculture in the Peace Corps. The move to Rutherford County ended up drawing on just about everything he'd learned in his career. Getting a grant meant finding a business purpose for the broadband, and Will knew the county's farm legacy. In the Peace Corps, Will had taught families in the sub-tropics to become self-sustainable in 75 square meters. "We have land here, good land. Some of it needed work, but I knew we could grow things," says Will.

In 2005, a \$1.44-million grant from the Golden Leaf Foundation, which had wisely invested the state's piece of the