



This newly built wetland park is open to visitors free of charge.

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Growth brings better life in Changsha

Rapid development has led to higher incomes, improved public services

By LI FUSHENG and FENG ZHIWEI

Changsha, capital of Central China's Hunan province, has achieved rapid economic growth in recent years, allowing its government to allocate more funds and resources to improving the living standard of local residents.

A recent report released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said that the city is among the fastest-growing cities in the world in terms of comprehensive economic strength.

Locals have directly benefited from the growth.

In 2011, Changsha ranked first among provincial capitals in central China in terms of per capita disposable income. That year, incomes of urban residents reached 27,000 yuan, and rural incomes hit 12,700 yuan.

Other gains from economic development include improved facilities, better city management, more public services and wider coverage of the social security system.

Affordable housing

Due to rising real estate prices in the city and China as a whole, the government has deemed it a top priority to offer low-income families affordable housing,



Free performances of local operas are regularly held at the Xiangjiang Theater.



A bridge is under construction on the Xiangjiang River. When complete, the bridge will ease Changsha's traffic problems.

which includes low-price apartments for sale or lease.

Xu Desong, 82, who has no other living family members, lives alone on his monthly pension of 1,000 yuan (\$157) a month. For him and other residents with low incomes, commercial apartments were anything but affordable before the government started the housing campaign several years ago.

He is now living in an apartment at an incredibly low rental rate, he said.

"The monthly rent is 1 yuan per square meter, so I pay 40 yuan per month for this cozy home," Xu said, smiling as he spoke of his residence in the city's Yuhua district.

The old man said he was grateful for the government's helping hand in solving his problems.

Another 27,314 economically affordable apartments are scheduled to be built in 2012, with nearly 17,000, or 62 percent, of the total already finished, according to government officials.

In addition, the government has invested to renovate the old residential communities in the city by repairing the drainage, road, gas, power and water supply facilities, and other infrastructure.

Investments have also been made to improve living facilities for rural residents.

Take the Guanshan village in Ningxiang county for example. The government updated its power grid, enabling locals to enjoy more modern conveniences that require a larger electricity capacity.

Faster transport

Like many cities in the world, Changsha used to suffer traffic jams due to its increasing number of motor vehicles.

Official statistics show that this city, with a population of 7 million, had 1 million motor vehicles in 2010, and the figure has since grown at a rate of about 10 percent per year.

However, following the introduction of modern traffic management means—high-definition road monitors and an intelligent traffic distribution system—in 2011, traffic jams have been cut by 20 percent and the traffic at peak hours flows 21 percent faster, said officials in charge of Changsha's traffic affairs.

More than 90 percent of residents are satisfied with the government's efforts to alleviate traffic, according to a recent poll cited by government officials.

To facilitate urban transport, Changsha is also planning to build a subway network composed of 12 lines, with the combined length reaching 456 kilometers. The first line is scheduled to be open to traffic in 2013.

Furthermore, new bridges and tunnels across the Xiangjiang River, which runs through the city, are already under construction.

These projects will help further reduce traffic jams when completed, government officials said.

Free services

Four years ago, the Changsha government launched a campaign to offer more free services for its residents.

Local primary and middle schools students now can go swimming free of charge during their summer vacation at more than 40 swimming pools across the city because the government

has already paid these venues for the service.

This has helped kids exercise and, more importantly, effectively prevented accidents, such as drowning, that usually happen when swimming in rivers, according to the city's sports officials.

Also to local residents' satisfaction, the campaign includes the construction of free community parks.

Over the past three years, 57 parks, which have a combined area of more than 450,000 square meters, have been finished and are now open to the public, enabling residents to have a respite from the busy urban life.

Another highlight of the campaign is free performances of local operas at the Xiangjiang Theater in downtown Changsha that have been put on since June 2010.

Starting at 7:30 pm, the performances run for about one hour every evening from Tuesday to Sunday, drawing fans from across the city.

"I really appreciate the opportunity to enjoy great and free performances," said Liu Dayu, a long-time attendee of the opera.

The city government plans to launch more free activities that will help local residents to enjoy their leisure time, said Zhang Xiangtao, head of Changsha's publicity department.

Entrepreneurship

Another effort of the government is to help local college graduates find better job and career opportunities, a city government official said.

In addition to offering job placement assistance, he said the government also encourages graduates to start their own businesses.

Each year, the government allocates no less than 550 million yuan to finance entrepreneurial initiatives, of which 120 million yuan is dedicated to recent college graduates, he added.

Official statistics show that the government has to date earmarked nearly 2 billion yuan for promising entrepreneurs, and 16,000 recent college graduates have become business owners.

Among them is Dai Yuefeng, a graduate of Hunan Normal University.

Starting his business with the government's help in October 2006, Dai soon made his fortune by selling skin care products, and his company now provides jobs to dozens of people, including many recent graduates.

Social security

Ensuring that as many people as possible are covered by the social security system is also a priority for the city government.

In 2011, the government allocated 630 million yuan to ensure children from low-income families will not drop out of school due to economic reasons, a policy that has ben-



Changsha Party chief Chen Run'er (right) visits a low-income family to learn about their need for affordable housing.



About 27,000 affordable apartments are expected to be finished by the end of the year.



Picturesque Guanshan village is representative of the new countryside in Changsha.

efited at least 1.58 million students in the city.

In the same year, the city government promulgated a favorable policy to cut medical costs for those aged over 80.

As of June 30, 2012, the policy had benefited more than 31,000 senior citizens in Changsha.

The beneficiaries are not limited to those who hold a permanent *hukou*—or residential certificate—in Changsha.

Also covered under the policy are migrant workers from the countryside outside of Changsha. Their children now can enjoy free education in the city.

Statistics said that about 30 percent of the school students enjoying free education—or 79,500—are children of migrant workers.

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