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IT'S GETTING CROWDED HERE Census: Lee County Grows by Almost 30,000 In One Year

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Lee County gained nearly 30,000 people in a year, ranking it 10th largest in population increase and 22nd in percentage increase among counties in the nation.

But those latest U.S. Census Bureau figures on the fastest-growing counties come with consequences. A rapidly rising population means more federal funding and grant potential, but it can hurt tourism and makes building roads, schools and government facilities daunting.

There were 29,835 residents added to Lee between July 1, 2004, and July 1, 2005, putting the county at 544,758. That's a 5.8 percent increase. While not as meteoric as Lee, Collier County also ranked high in fast growth over both one- and five-year periods in the latest census numbers.

Number one in percentage growth in the nation was Florida's Flagler County, at 10.7.

While the old, rural Lee appears to be slowly disappearing and a more developed one blossoming, for those moving here from larger cities, it's still just a small town.

Blake Skillman, 32, his wife Kelly and three children moved with his job at Sprint in Las Vegas to Cape Coral.

"We're from a big city, so this is kind of remote for us," Skillman said. "Life has slowed down for us a little bit. Compared to Las Vegas, it may be a better place to raise our children. The schools are better. We have a backyard for our kids to play, and we didn't have that back home."

Longer-term growth for Lee also has been impressive. From April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2005, Lee County's population increased by 103,870, putting it among the top for percentage and numerical increases, according to the latest census numbers. And it's hard to keep up with that pace.

"While we had healthy growth in the 1980s and 1990s, the growth since 2000, and particularly in the last couple of years, has outpaced anyone's expectations," said Assistant County Manager Pete Winton. "We're keeping up, as far as infrastructure, but we're pedaling pretty fast and there certainly is no 'down time' between projects like there used to be; it's just go, go, go. We're expanding the waste-to-energy facility, the jail, the justice system, the roads network. We have expansion projects going on at literally every one of our water and sewer plants."

As more people buy homes here and add to the traffic, it requires local governments to provide more utilities, streets, lighting, schools, fire and police protection, and ambulance service.

Although more property taxes are being collected, it hardly ever pays for the cost of adding those public services so cities and counties have had to rely on other specific fees and taxes to make ends meet.

Pros and cons

Rapid growth can be seen as a positive or negative.

For example, the county's Economic Development office uses population growth as a marketing tool when trying to attract new industry, said Jennifer Dunn, spokeswoman for Economic Development.

"Definitely, any time we have third party credibility, it's very valuable, we will talk about our growth," Dunn said. "Not only population, but job growth because we hope to bring diversity in the job market and raise the average wage."

On the other hand, when the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau markets the area for tourism, a fast-growing population isn't mentioned.

"We sell the fact that the environment is unspoiled compared to other destinations and not as built up as other areas, that's one of the major attractions," said spokesman Lee Rose.

"We try to distinguish our destination from others by talking about the wildlife, nature, history, things like that. Population really doesn't play into it at all. It certainly could be construed as a negative."

Population also is tied to state and federal funding.

"Many major state shared revenues are distributed on a population-based formula," said Steven O'Cain, legislative analyst for the Legislative Committee on Intergovernmental Relations. "That would make a difference with funding with Lee maybe growing faster than, say, the more rural Panhandle counties."

For example, each year, the state distributes revenue sharing to all Florida counties. A portion of the sales tax collected by the state is redistributed and population is a key factor in how much Lee gets, said Jim Lewin, a fiscal specialist for the county manager's office.

"We have seen a significant increase in revenue sharing each year and I think it's owing to population," Lewin said. Lee got \$11.1 million in fiscal year 2003-04 and \$11.9 million in 2004-05.

With LeeTran, meanwhile, the federal transit distribution is based partly on population. For each person in Lee County, LeeTran will get \$2.62 for building and other capital projects. But there's a downside. Because Lee's population isn't densely concentrated, the amount of funding they get is not as high as it would be if it were more dense," said Steve Myers, director of LeeTran.

Cape Coral, where construction supports the arrival of about 10,000 people a year, continued to represent about 25 percent of the county's population.

"It's a good city. It's getting bigger," said Marta Alvarez, 37, through her son, Yasiel Alvarez, 15, who translated for her.

The Alvarez family looked in Lehigh Acres for a home before moving to Cape Coral about two weeks ago.

"It's quiet. We just like it," she said.

Cape Coral Mayor Eric Feichthaler said the availability of affordable land in Lehigh Acres and south Lee County keeps Cape Coral from claiming a larger share of the county's population. Unlike Lehigh Acres, parts of Cape Coral, such as the southwest, are nearly built out, the mayor said.

Most of the jobs in Lee also are east of the Caloosahatchee River, he said. People want to live near their jobs.

Cape Coral's population as reported by the Census Bureau was 118,979 as of mid-2003 and 142,858 a year later; 2005 population estimates have not been released. The city estimates it now has 151,227 residents.

Bonita Springs/South Lee

Last year, Bonita grew 3 percent, part of the trend of growth in Lee that challenges government to keep pace, Bonita City Manager Gary Price said.

"You look at it and say, 'It's a lot better than being the slowest growing county,' " Price said. "But it gives you extra challenges with traffic, getting work-force housing built You can't build 'em fast enough."

Al Avitabile, 56, lives in South Fort Myers at Terra Verde Country Club. He moved here in 2004 from the Boston area.

"I came here to work during pre-retirement and enjoy the weather," he said. "I got tired of shoveling snow."

Avitabile had been coming to Fort Myers and Sanibel Island for 35 years before making the move permanently.

"I didn't expect this much growth and I didn't anticipate all the changes that have occurred since I've been here," he said. "I envisioned it growing in the next 20 years, but it has grown faster than I expected the last two years."

Fort Myers

While the city of Fort Myers had 6.6 percent population growth last year, it's mostly due to annexation. It's actually one of the lesser-growing areas.

Fort Myers has been taking in considerable county land in recent years. Its annexation of Belle Vue and Dunbar added 4,082 people, said city spokeswoman Jennifer Hobbic.

"We went up 6 percent. We were stagnant for so many years, and made a little jump," Hobbic said. "But I wouldn't rate us with the other cities. Of course, we're happy that the city is growing and that more people are finding this a good city to live."

Collier County

"I believe we're better prepared for growth than in the past. We've tried to meet the challenge head on," Collier County Manager Jim Mudd said.

County commissioners have launched an aggressive construction program to build more roads, water and sewer plants and other public amenities, Mudd said. Still, commissioners have had to turn down new housing developments because they weren't sure nearby roads would meet capacity requirements, commission Chairman Frank Halas said.

Maia von Becker, 39, and husband, Robert, 46, moved from Massachusetts to Collier last March. "Part of it was the climate, and part of it was because the cost of living is less" than the Boston area, she said.

"In most cases, growth has been good for business," said R. Scott Cameron, 54, who has been in commercial real estate sales in Collier for 27 years.

A bigger population has brought a better quality of life - in the arts, recreation, fine restaurants - and the tax base to support it, Cameron said.

Alternatively, he said more people also have brought the aggravation of traffic jams and long waiting lists for seats at Naples' finer restaurants. That's why he lives three blocks from his office in Naples, he said.

Susan Stiefel said she and her husband, Roger, both 59, moved from from Kentucky, buying a house in Vanderbilt Beach in September 2000.

They had vacationed in Miami for years every March, but went on a day trip with a friend to Southwest Florida and drove through Naples in 1996.

That's all it took, Stiefel said.

"It was just gorgeous. It was as pretty as a post card," she said.

- Staff writers Ralph Paulk, Denes Husty III, Don Ruane and Ryan Hiraki contributed to this report.