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CAPE'S GROWTH RANKS 5TH IN US But Hot Businesses, Mall Yet To Arrive

Reporter: Pete Skiba, Staff

Starbucks isn't here. A regional mall remains a dream. There's no big name bookstore either. But Cape Coral remains the fifth-fastest growing city in the country, according to the U.S. Census.

The report, released Tuesday, said the city grew at 9.2 percent from July 1, 2004, to July 1, 2005, reaching a total population of 140,000. Almost a year later, 154,000 people live here, based on city estimates. Cape also was No. 5 on the census growth chart in 2003-2004.

But still no Starbucks, Barnes & Noble, Borders or mall.

"No Starbucks is a bummer," said Cape Coral resident Cathy Sisson, 35. "Cape Coral is bigger than Fort Myers; we should have our own."

The top city on the fastest growing list, Elk Grove, Calif., with a population of 112,338, quaffs coffee from nine Starbucks.

The city on the west coast just south of Sacramento also has a Borders Books and a 1.15 million-square-foot regional mall being reviewed for permitting.

"I'm surprised we don't have the chain stores and a mall," said Cape Coral resident Valerie Whittle, 46. "I don't know why they don't come here. I hate to go across the river, especially on weekends."

What gives?

"You have any freeways?" Elk Grove spokeswoman Christine Brainerd asked. "Our major mall development is coming along the freeways."

The closest thing Cape Coral has to a California freeway is Interstate 75 about seven miles away.

Then there's the matter of income. Elk Grove has a median household income of \$72,699, Brainerd said. Median income means that half of the people have incomes below the number and half above.

The median income in Cape Coral is \$50,703.

And still no Starbucks.

But Elk Grove needs that extra income. The median home price is \$449,000. The Florida Association of Realtors for the Cape Coral-Fort Myers area and the rest of Lee County pegs the median here at \$280,500.

Cape Coral residents may not make as much money as those in Elk Grove, but they aren't shy about spending it, even at the eight Starbucks across the Caloosahatchee River.

They spend more than \$158 million per year at restaurants or on take out, says an economic profile from the city's Economic Development Department.

No information on coffee spending was available, but residents imbibed more than \$25 million in alcoholic beverages.

How Elk Grove residents spent their money was not available.

"I don't get it," said Cape Coral resident Mary Ann Fowler, 49. "We are here, and we have the money. We need the stores; give us a Macy's and the rest."

And a Starbucks.

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North Las Vegas in Nevada was No. 2 on the fastest growing list, while Port St. Lucie was No. 3. Both have Starbucks.

In fact, on the Coffee@epodunk.com Web site, profiling Port St. Lucie, is this statement: "There are those who believe that a town without Starbucks is just a small step above barbarism."

How small do you have to be to have a Starbucks? Consider this: Falls Church, Va., with approximately 10,000 people, based on the 2000 Census, has seven Starbucks. Katy, Texas, with a population of 11,775, has six.

There are eight within a 20-mile radius in Fort Myers, two at Southwest International Airport.

With the Cape growing at 10,000 people per year, and keeping a tight hold on the census growth chart, the City Council has made economic development its No. 1 priority.

"We'll get there," said Mike Jackson, city economic development director. "We'll have the Starbucks and the bookstores and all the rest. We've got the market."