

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

March 16, 2006

Section: News

Edition: Main; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: A3

Georgia a leader in counties with fastest, slowest growth

Demographic swing: Military personnel shifts could turn prospects around for shrinking Chattahoochee.

BOB DART

Washington -- Georgia is home to some of the fastest-growing counties in the nation -- and also the fastest-shrinking, according to U.S. Census estimates released today.

Chattahoochee County on the Alabama border and just south of Columbus, lost 6.2 percent of its population from July 1, 2004, to July 1, 2005, making it the most rapidly dwindling county in the country, according to the Census Bureau.

Liberty County in southeast Georgia ranked second, with a 4.9 percent population decline.

Washington County in Middle Georgia was fourth, with a 4.3 percent drop in population, and Terrell County, in the southwest farm belt, was 10th, with a 2 percent decline.

Three other Southern counties -- in Florida, Alabama and Virginia -- were also on the dwindling list, which excluded counties with fewer than 10,000 people. Even relatively minor shifts in the populations of such small counties can cause sizable percentage changes.

But the South also was heavily represented on the list of fastest-growing counties, with Flagler County, Fla., leading the way and the Washington, D.C., suburbs of northern Virginia close behind.

Georgia had 18 of the nation's 100 fastest-growing counties from April 1, 2000, to July 1, 2005, according to the census estimates. Most were part of suburban and exurban Atlanta: Paulding, Douglas, Carroll, Coweta, Spalding, Henry, Newton, Walton, Gwinnett, Barrow, Jackson, Forsyth, Cherokee, Dawson and Pickens.

The other Georgia counties on the 100 fastest-growing list were White, also increasingly home to Atlanta commuters; Effingham, a suburb of Savannah; and Lee, a suburb of Albany.

By contrast with many of Georgia's declining rural counties, the metro counties have booming economies. But it is not clear whether Chattahoochee County, where the population fell from 15,646 on July 1, 2004, to 14,679 on July 1, 2005, will retain its status as the leader among the nation's fastest-shrinking counties.

While most of the other shrinking counties in Georgia have farm economies that suffer from high unemployment and poverty rates, Chattahoochee's demographics are dominated by Fort Benning, just across the Muscogee County line, said Gregory Harper, a demographer and statistician for the Census Bureau.

Deployments of military units and their families into and out of the sprawling infantry base cause significant swings in Chattahoochee's population, he explained.

"That's the main reason for the big decline," Harper said. "I wouldn't read too much into it."

With Fort Benning slated to receive thousands of new troops as the result of the recent base realignment and closure process, Chattahoochee's prospects should soon turn.

Harper said the same is true for Liberty County, which is subject to the demographic whims at Fort Stewart, its largest employer.

But the decline has been more consistent in farm counties such as Washington and Terrell. Previous population studies have shown rural counties losing their population to nearby urban areas.

That -- as well as migration from other states -- feeds metro Atlanta's growth.

"This has been the pattern for awhile" around Atlanta, Frey said.

A different pattern exists in Los Angeles, where there are more residents moving out than people moving in. But the metro Los Angeles population continues to grow because people are arriving from other countries.

"A lot of people coming into [metro] Atlanta aren't going to be familiar with grits and will be Yankees fans rather than Braves fans," Frey said.

But even with the area's international population growing, most arrivals are still coming from other parts of the United States rather than from foreign countries, he said.

Graphic

ELIZABETH LANDT / Staff

COUNTY GROWTH

One-year: 2004-2005

The gainers

0 - 2.5 percent (90 counties)

2.5 - 5.0 percent (19 counties)

5.0 - 6.4 percent (10 counties)

The losers

40 counties lost population

Map of Georgia counties is color coded to indicate losers and gainers.

GREATEST POPULATION CHANGE

(counties with 10,000 or greater population)

Fastest growing counties

a) Forsyth 6.4 percent

b) Newton 6.2 percent

c) Paulding 6.0 percent

d) Barrow 5.8 percent

e) Henry 5.6 percent

Slowest growing counties

f) Chattahoochee -6.2 percent

g) Liberty -4.9 percent

h) Washington -4.3 percent

i) Terrell -2.0 percent

j) McIntosh -1.8 percent

The above counties are located on the map of Georgia.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Copyright 2006 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution