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State No. 1 in growing counties Population boom brings gifts, problems

CHRISTOPHER QUINN

Georgia led the nation in the number of fastest-growing counties, by percentage of population, from 2000 to 2005, according to the latest estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Peach State had 18 of the top 100 fast growers. Fifteen of them surround metro Atlanta. Five others in the metro ring didn't make the list, but their growth rates show them changing from rural to exurban.

The No. 2 state, Florida, had 14 counties on the list, followed by Texas, with 13.

"I think of Atlanta as kind of swallowing up the South," said William Frey, who studies U.S. population growth at Washington's Brookings Institution.

He published a study in the fall showing that metro Atlanta is still a national leader in growth and continues expanding in territory.

Gwinnett County remains among the nation's most powerful population magnets, according to census estimates released today.

The county grew by 25,696 people from July 2004 to July 2005 and is home to 726,273 residents, the Census Bureau reported. And the addition of 137,825 people so far this decade ranks 13th nationally and second in the South, behind Broward County, Fla.

Metro Atlanta's growth sphere extends about 80 miles north to south and east to west. It bumps against Alabama on the west by way of Carroll County (91st among the top 100). It spreads to Dawson County to the north (67th, and one county away from Tennessee), Jackson County to the northeast (43rd, and two counties away from South Carolina) and Newton County to the southeast (eighth out of 100).

"There's no outward boundary. The outward boundary in 2050 is going to be Chattanooga, Greenville and Macon," said Frank Norton of the W.L. Norton agency, an insurance, real estate and growth consulting business based in Gainesville.

The growth drives local economies, bringing new construction jobs and families, followed by new businesses and services.

Tax bases grow, but so do headaches, as leaders scramble to keep up with demand for new roads, schools and services. The effects hit Atlanta as the city deals with ever more commuters and people driving in for shopping and entertainment. The results can be measured in poor air quality, increased stormwater flow and the width of Atlanta's clogged highways. The latest proposal on the transportation front is a 23-lane I-75 north of town.

Norton sees many factors driving the suburban spread: second homes on lakes or in the mountains, the influx of retirees, and the search for more house for the buck and the pastoral scenes that rural counties promise.

Norton's research indicates that yearly growth of 5 percent to 6 percent per county is sustainable as Atlanta remains a Sun Belt growth magnet.

"There are some downsides, building transportation, schools, infrastructure ... all those challenges," Norton said. And newcomers want formerly rural counties to provide services they are used to, like libraries with Internet research centers and curbside garbage pickup. Then they balk at the tax increases their demands bring.

Charles Laughinghouse, a Forsyth County commissioner, fields phone calls about the problems. Forsyth led all Georgia counties, with a growth percentage of 42.7 from 2000 to 2005.

"People will call and complain about traffic, traffic, traffic," he said. "People get very upset about school redistricting and school overcrowding."

And there may be a natural limiter to growth, he believes.

"Water is going to be the factor that limits growth not only in Forsyth but in all of North Georgia," Laughinghouse said.

"This entire area is suffering from growing pains, and will continue to. How are we going to feed them, how are we going to clothe them, how are we going to bathe them?"

"We may not have to build them houses," he quipped. "They may be stuck in traffic. We just need to offer curb service."

Staff writer Brian Feagans contributed to this article.

Graphic

CHARLES W. JONES / Staff

MORE COUNTIES PULLED INTO ATLANTA'S GROWTH RING

The counties growing more than 5 percent and Coweta, at 4.3 percent, were among the fastest-growing in the nation in 2004-2005.

POPULATION GROWTH:

0% - 2.49%

COBB

FULTON

CLAYTON

DEKALB

ROCKDALE

--

2.5% - 4.99%

GORDON

BARTOW

DAWSON

HALL

GWINNETT

OCONEE

MORGAN

JASPER

CARROLL

COWETA

FAYETTE

--

5% - 6.4%

CHEROKEE

FORSYTH

JACKSON

BARROW

WALTON

NEWTON

HENRY

PAULDING

DOUGLAS

U.S. Census 2006

Inset map outlines area of detail in Georgia relative to Atlanta.

Graphic

WELCOME TO THE BOOMTOWN

Fifteen of the nation's fastest-growing counties surround metro Atlanta:

.....Percent ..2000.....2005

.....growth....population..population

5. Forsyth....42.7%98,407.....140,393

7. Henry.....40.6%....119,370.....167,848

8. Newton39.9%62,00186,713

10. Paulding..37.8%81,568.....112,411

24. Barrow....29.9%46,14459,954

25. Cherokee..29.8%....141,907.....184,211

43. Jackson ..25.7%41,58952,292

50. Walton....24.7%60,68775,647

59. Pickens ..23.8%22,97928,442

65. Gwinnett..23.4%....588,448.....726,273

67. Dawson....23.3%15,99919,731

68. Coweta....23.2%89,215.....109,903

77. Douglas ..22.2%92,284.....112,760

91. Carroll ..20.8%87,268.....105,453

94. White20.6%19,94424,055

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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