



Economic Development News

Rutherford now state's fastest-growing county

Mar. 20, 2008

Two of Nashville's suburban counties keep jockeying for the title of fastest-growing, a trend analysts say bucks the rest of the nation but means government must work to keep up with the influx.

Rutherford and Williamson counties ranked first and second, respectively, for highest percentage of growth from 2006-07, each posting about 4.5 percent gains. The popularity is no fluke — U.S. Census Bureau figures released today also show the same trend since 2000.

Rutherford County's 2007 population stands at 241,462 — a 25.73 percent increase from 2000. Williamson County's population jumped 24.82 percent to 166,128 during the same period of time.

Newcomers echo each other on reasons for moves to Nashville's suburbs: quick trips to the city, cheaper housing than coastal areas, a better climate than in northern states and overall quality of life.

Marilyn Weaver, who moved to Rutherford County from Mt. Vernon, Ill., about a year and a half ago, said she and husband have quickly settled in.

"We're happy here. We like the different things that are available in Rutherford County," Weaver said.

For Middle Tennessee's long-time residents, Weaver and other newcomers bring higher property values but unwelcome crowding.

Joi Sherrill bought her 2,000-square-foot home on two acres in Rutherford County's Blackman community 25 years ago for \$54,000. She and her husband were young and couldn't afford the big-city prices. Today, the same amount buys a less-than-one-acre vacant lot, said Sherrill, who began working as a Realtor six years ago.

"We're not so rural any more, and I am appreciative that amenities have come out our way,"

Sherrill said. "It's a great place to live because people can work in any of the surrounding counties and be in Rutherford in under 30 minutes."

Cindy Perkins, who works at City Cafe in downtown Murfreesboro, said the growth is causing some challenges, such as an increase in traffic.

"It's almost as hard to drive in Murfreesboro as in Nashville," said Perkins, who moved to Murfreesboro in 1983.

Despite her traffic concerns, Perkins said she likes the fact that folks from different nationalities are moving to the county.

"I think it's neat because we got a lot of different cultures, backgrounds, people from all over the world," she said. "It allows our children to see that we are not living in a bubble. It exposes them to other cultures. That's an asset."

Five of the 10 fastest-growing counties in Tennessee, by percentage, are in the Nashville area, census figures show. That consistent growth is largely unparalleled across the nation, said William Frey, a demographer with The Brookings Institution, an independent think tank in Washington, D.C.

By contrast, Davidson County saw a less than 1 percent increase in its population growth from 2006-07, ranking No. 44 on the list. Even that would be considered steady growth compared to other parts of the country, Frey said.

Today's census numbers reveal another trend: a second tier of growth in counties farther from Nashville. Bedford and Maury made the state's top 15 list for both periods measured.

David Penn, director of the Business and Economic Research Center at MTSU, called them "not red-hot, but very warm" and attributed the growth to people looking for even cheaper housing and a more rural setting.

The growth comes at a cost, as local leaders work to keep up with needs for roads, public safety, water and schools.

For example, the Rutherford County Board of Education voted Wednesday night to spend more than \$650,000 to buy 22 portable classrooms for next school year.

County Mayor Ernest Burgess said folks are attracted to the county because of its "quality of life, good public educational system, presence of a great university (MTSU) and the opportunity for a wide range of jobs is appealing."

He said the primary challenge for local leaders will be to "continue to provide quality education with the proper resources, facilities and buildings, trying to balance our budget and maintain our low tax level. That has stretched us."

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