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## Rutherford growth ranks 20th in U.S. Cheap land, plentiful jobs spur county home building



**Crawling traffic from repair work on I-24 in Rutherford is one of the negative byproducts of the county's residential construction boom.** JOHN A. GILLIS / THE DAILY NEWS JOURNAL

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As lifelong Rutherford County resident Susan Boney puts it, her home isn't a "laid-back country place anymore."

In fact, on Monday, it was labeled as one of the top 20 fastest-growing counties in the nation based on the rate at

which single-family houses, town homes and apartments are being built in the area.

The massive county on Nashville's southeastern flank is quickly pulling away from the rest of the Midstate region in its growth rate, as plentiful jobs, inexpensive land and bargain home prices make Rutherford an area of choice for many residents, especially first-time homeowners.

The number of housing units in Rutherford grew by 6.4 percent between July 1, 2004, and July 1, 2005, the top growth rate in Tennessee and the 20th-highest in the United States, according to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Only one other Middle Tennessee county, Williamson, cracked the Top 100, coming in at No. 84.

Holly Sears, director of economic development for the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce, said the growth was a testament to the healthy local economy.

"Rooftops drive retail," she said. "It is also a great facilitator for a growing work force, too, because obviously people are moving into the market."

One factor driving the Rutherford housing boom is would-be buyers searching for a less expensive alternative to homes in neighboring Williamson County, where the median home price tops \$370,000.

By contrast, Rutherford's median home price is \$150,000, real estate data show.

"Providing good value. That's something that Rutherford is doing more so than Williamson," said Bud George, general manager of Bob Parks Realty, a Murfreesboro-based real estate agency and home builder.

Rutherford's advantages include land that is inexpensive to develop, a highly competitive market for new home construction, and local governments that give developers wide discretion to build as they

see fit. And Rutherford County has added more than 20,000 new jobs since 2001, in both the blue-collar and white-collar sectors.

According to Census data, 5,394 housing units were built between July 2004 and July 2005, bringing the number of housing units up to 90,147. Rutherford County ranked No. 74 on the list the previous year with a 4.2 percent growth rate.

"The area has been very attractive ... due to job creation locally and the low-tax environment in Tennessee," said Murfreesboro Mayor Tommy Bragg.

"I think there is no question it helps generate moving," said Wayne Howard, who moved to Murfreesboro from Sugar Land, Texas, to retire a couple of years ago. Howard's wife, Dianne, was a Murfreesboro native and still has family living there.

"The reason we chose Murfreesboro was because it had the small-town atmosphere," he said. "It had growth and had a lot of the conveniences that we were used to.

Observers are divided over whether the swift pace can continue. Rutherford isn't without its share of growing pains. One of the biggest complaints among many residents is traffic.

The 64-year-old Boney said she had tried to avoid some of Murfreesboro's busiest intersections such as Cason Lane at Old Fort Parkway and Memorial Boulevard at Broad Street.

Another downside of growth, she said, is seeing old farms disappear.

"I feel we are going to cover all our land with homes," said Boney, a retired Rutherford County employee, "but people have to have a place to live."

A few Rutherford County residents are getting out to escape the growing population.

Brenda Kalt said she and her husband were moving from Rutherford to Cannon County to find more affordable living and to escape the traffic, which she considers "atrocious" and "crazy."

"A lot of people are starting to build outside of Rutherford County for that reason," she said, adding that her drive to work at an area hospital is often hindered by road and home construction zones.

But local business leaders say there's no good alternative to more growth.

"If you aren't growing, you're either stagnant or dead," said Candy Roberts, executive vice president of the Middle Tennessee Association of Realtors. "Growth is the better option — always."

Builders are optimistic that the fast growth will continue, but David Penn, director of the Business and Economic Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University's College of Business, said job growth may be showing some signs of tailing off. That eventually could translate into slower population growth, he said. •

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