

North Port is growing rapidly, Census Bureau says

By JOHN DAVIS
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NORTH PORT -- The latest estimates released by the U.S. Census Bureau put North Port's population past the 50,000 mark and within less than 2,500 people of surpassing Sarasota as the county's most populous city.

The numbers are even more remarkable considering that the 2000 census listed North Port's population at fewer than 24,000. The 121 percent increase from 2000 to 2006 makes it the fastest growing city in the state with a population of more than 10,000.

The rate of growth almost assures North Port's population will eventually be greater than the number of people dwelling within Sarasota's city limits.

"By the 2010 census, we'll be the largest city in the county," Commissioner Fred Tower said.

North Port's growth makes it an anomaly in Sarasota County. Residents of Venice and Sarasota have fought to stunt the rapid growth experienced by other coastal communities in Florida, and the census numbers show that effort has been mostly successful.

Sarasota has picked up fewer than 300 people within its city limits since the 2000 census, putting its population at nearly 53,000 today. That is about half a percent in growth.

Venice, with a population of about 21,000, gained almost 2,500 people, a 13 percent jump since 2000. While that is slightly above the statewide average of 12 percent for cities with 10,000 people or more, it is still far behind its burgeoning neighbor to the east.

North Port -- a city with no beachfront land and mostly blue-collar residents -- positioned itself for this type of growth.

The city's original plan included more than 67,000 platted lots, more home lots than the city of Sarasota has people today.

But for decades, the idea that North Port might become one of the largest cities on the west coast of Florida seemed far-fetched. It was big in area only, with deteriorating roads along tracts of lands where weeds sprouted instead of neighborhoods.

"It's about time," said Commissioner Barbara Gross of the Census Bureau's acknowledgment of the city's size.

The city has gained a reputation for being friendly to home builders and developers. The city's commissioners have repeatedly backed away from impact fee increases, despite the advice of experts who have said the city needs more money to keep up with growth.

In addition, North Port offers lower housing costs than neighboring cities, making it a bedroom community for people who work in Sarasota or Port Charlotte.

It is unclear what the population milestone might mean for North Port's immediate future.

State tax dollars are distributed according to state figures, which have North Port at roughly 48,000 people and Sarasota at more than 55,000. The state population estimates come from the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida.

"We challenge the state number every year," said Terri Gould, North Port's finance director.

According to Scott Cody, a demographer with the state bureau, many cities call to lobby for a higher number. But in the case of North Port, the federal and state agencies are very close in their independent estimates.

"We're probably a little lower than the Census (Bureau) but not as much as it might look," Cody said. He added that the state will update its figures in August, and that might add more to the North Port tally.

The numbers, which city and county leaders say are not surprising, highlight differences between North Port and Sarasota in terms of clout and amenities.

Sarasota's overall taxable value is almost twice that of North Port, even though North Port is four times larger than Sarasota in geographic area.

"We have the numbers, and there's certain areas that they could pay attention to us a little more than they have," said North Port Commissioner Richard Lockhart.

Keeping up with the growth has not been cheap. The school district is spending \$35 million on a new middle school in North Port, and North Port High School came with a price tag of \$43 million. Even with a new school coming in 2008, school planners are telling North Port that they cannot keep up.

The city is also lobbying the county to provide money for a second library, more public transit and possibly a jail.

"We're going to be challenged as it is with providing city infrastructure in North Port," County Commissioner Jon Thaxton said last year as city and county leaders worked on a joint vision for North Port's growth. The agreement eventually fell apart.

North Port's laundry list of internal needs includes hundreds of miles of roads to repave and a major expansion of its water and sewer system.

County leaders say the population numbers are not going to change anything, and that the county is working with the city as best it can.

But Thaxton acknowledged Wednesday that the census numbers underscore North Port's growing influence in county government.

"Shortly, the city's numbers will control a County Commission seat," Thaxton wrote in an e-mail. "(I)n time, as the population swells, it will have the ability to substantially effect (sic) two or more county commission seats in close races."