



St. Johns County was eighth-fastest growing county in US last year

By Stuart Korfhage

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In a state with communities slurping up new residents by the tens of thousands, St. Johns County was among the fastest-growing counties in the country from mid-2017 to mid-2018 but just third in Florida.

The U.S. Census Bureau released population estimates on Thursday that showed this county added about 11,000 residents over that period for a total population of 254,261 as of July 1, 2018. That increase of 4.2 percent in one year made St. Johns County the eighth-fastest growing county in the country.

The list (among counties with at least 20,000 people) was topped by Williams County of North Dakota at 5.9 percent. The other Florida counties on the list were Walton County (4.5 percent) and Osceola County (4.3 percent).

As for the largest numerical growth, Arizona's Maricopa County led the way with 81,244 more residents. Florida's Orange County was seventh with 27,712 additional residents, and Hillsborough County was 10th with 26,773.

The population of St. Johns County has grown about 34 percent since the last full Census report in 2010. The county has more than doubled in size since the 2000 report.

Indications are the county will continue rank among the top-growing counties for years to come. There are tens of thousands of new homes approved that have not been built. And more residential developments are approved almost every month — although many of them are small-scale projects.

One of the county's biggest developments, SilverLeaf, is just now coming online and could include more than 10,000 homes between County Road 210 and State Road 16. Other large developments like Nocatee and RiverTown have established residents but still have capacity for thousands more homes.

The latest study from the University of Florida's Population Program says that with moderate growth, this county could have 329,500 residents by 2030. It says with extreme growth, the population could be as high as 365,400 in 2030.

According to a report from the Associated Press, cities in central Florida grew by stadiums.

Metro Orlando grew by 60,000 residents last year, almost as large as the number of people who can fit into the city's Camping World Stadium, where college football bowl teams face off each winter.

The Tampa area grew last year by 51,000 residents, more than the number of fans who can fit into Tropicana Field, where the city's Tampa Bay Rays play baseball.

Only Texas grew by more people than Florida last year, and the addition of tens of thousands of new residents to central Florida cities will increase the importance next election of the Interstate 4 corridor, already the swingiest part of the nation's biggest swing state. That explosive growth also helps Florida's chances of getting additional congressional seats — and presidential electors — after the 2020 census.

Orlando had the nation's fifth largest increase for metro areas in pure numbers, surpassed by only Dallas, Phoenix, Houston and Atlanta. Tampa came in at No. 9.

In Tampa, the growth was completely driven by new arrivals. Without that inbound migration, Tampa would have lost population — deaths outnumbered births by almost 900 people. About two-thirds of the new arrivals came from U.S. states.

In Orlando, that migration dynamic was flipped, with about two-thirds of the new arrivals coming from outside the 50 U.S. states. After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in September 2017, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans moved to the Orlando area, but Thursday's Census release didn't detail how many of Orlando's new arrivals came from the island.

About a sixth of metro Orlando's population growth last year came from the natural increase of more births than death, and the rest was fueled by migration.

The intense growth wasn't limited to large cities and included smaller metros along Interstate 4, the east-west highway that slices through the center of Florida, the nation's third most populous state with 21.3 million residents.

The Lakeland-Winter Haven area, midway between Tampa and Orlando on Interstate 4, had the nation's fourth-largest growth rate at 3.2 percent, surpassed by only Midland, Texas; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; and St. George, Utah.

The Villages, the retirement community northwest of Orlando, grew by 3.1 percent, placing it at No. 6 for growth rate.

Since the last decennial census in 2010, South Florida and metro Orlando have both grown by the size of a medium city. South Florida added more than 632,000 people, and metro Orlando added 439,000 people, raising its population to 2.6 million.

The Florida Keys declined by 1,600 residents last year, with most of the drop from people moving away. Hurricane Irma, in September 2017, severely damaged 4,000 homes in the Keys, and most of them belonged to the archipelago's affordable housing stock, said Helene Wetherington, Monroe County's disaster recovery director.

"I absolutely suspect that many folks simply relocated if they couldn't find alternative housing," Wetherington said.

Mike Schneider of the Associated Press contributed to this story.