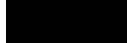




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Gilbert 5th-fastest-growing U.S. city

Southeast Valley town added 13,860 between '05, '06

Mike Walbert

The Arizona Republic

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It's almost becoming a little bit of ho-hum news around Gilbert.

The town once recognized as the Hay Capital of the World has been named the fifth-fastest-growing municipality in America.

New population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau released today show Gilbert added 13,860 people between 2005 and 2006, beefing up its total population to 191,500 people.

Gilbert wasn't the only Arizona municipality on the list: Phoenix cemented its standing as the fifth-largest city in the nation and topped the 1.5 million mark; and Mesa is closing in on 450,000.

Gilbert routinely has appeared on the top-five growth list the past several years, including the No. 1 spot in the 2000 census.

Karen Rolph chuckled when she learned of Gilbert's 7.8 percent growth.

Rolph moved to the southeast Valley community a dozen years ago from California, when Gilbert's population was nearly 60,000 people.

"Where are all these people coming from?" Rolph, 71, said.

Phoenix also had the largest population increase (43,000) of all cities between July 1, 2005, and July 1, 2006, according to estimates.

Mesa passed Kansas City, Mo. and Cleveland on its way to being the 38th-most-populous city nationwide.

City Manager Chris Brady said Mesa, which had a population of 447,541, is nowhere close to topping out.

"I think the best days for Mesa are still ahead," he said.

Meanwhile, Peoria was the seventh-fastest-growing city, with its population increasing by 5.8 percent to 142,024 .

"What it confirms is that we are still in the growth stage of our community," said Chad Daines, Peoria planning manager. "We need to ensure that the capital improvement program is properly aligned with that growth. How we project out the building of roads and other public facilities to support this growth is the key item."

Mayor a proud 'parent'

Gilbert is a former farming town where residents are primarily young marrieds with children and where calling it a "city" is a local faux pas.

Mayor Steve Berman said he is proud to see Gilbert's growth recognized and of how the town has managed it. Berman equated it to raising a gaggle of successful children.

"It's no trick to have 10 kids," Berman said. "The trick is to have 10 kids that go on to college and have meaningful lives."

Berman pointed to recent national accolades, including *CNN/Money Magazine* ranking Gilbert as the 16th-best community to live in the country and a Morgan Quitno Press study labeling Gilbert as the 22nd-safest municipality in America.

Gilbert, which is still in the process of shedding its bedroom community reputation, has seen significant changes in economic development over the past five-plus years.

The town's first and only freeway - Loop 202 - opened last summer and brought major retail along the corridor, three hospitals are open or under construction, and what will reportedly be Arizona's largest auto mall has opened its dealership.

Gilbert's growing pains

But, just like parents who butt heads with their maturing teenagers, Gilbert has experienced growing pains.

Since 2000, Gilbert has ballooned by 81,350 people, or a 74 percent increase.

The need for road improvements is a chief concern for town leaders and residents.

Republic reporters Ryan Konig, Gary Nelson and Cecilia Chan contributed to this article.