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Population booms in Maricopa, Pinal counties

By Sarah Lynch
Tribune



Forty-four year old Paul Abram moved his family to the southeast valley residential community of Morning Sun Farms about a year ago from Fresno, California. Abram is part of the fast growing population in Pinal County which has been cited as the sixth f

Ralph Fresno Tribune

The constant signs of growth in Maricopa and Pinal counties are hard to ignore. Farms have morphed into stuccoed suburbia. Condos are rising in Tempe. And despite the constant freeway construction, morning commuters still face grid-locked traffic. But it's no wonder that some Valley cities find themselves struggling to keep up with the demands for services and infrastructure.

This week, the U.S. Census Bureau released new population estimates revealing that Maricopa County has gained more residents in the last six years than any other county nationwide, making it the fourth-largest county in the U.S. Nearby Pinal County has also seen explosive growth in the same time period, and it is now ranked as the sixth fastest-growing county in the nation.

Maricopa County's total increase in residents over the past six years surpassed the increases in other heavily populated counties such as Los Angeles, Harris County, Texas, and Clark County, Nevada.

Maricopa County has gained almost 700,000 new residents since the 2000 Census.

"That's such an impressive number," said Robert Bernstein, a public affairs specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau. "When you think about the number of residents Maricopa County has added in six years, that's more than the population of almost every city in the country."

Good weather, strong job opportunities and cheaper housing were the primary factors that attracted residents and drove the explosive growth, population experts agreed.

"What has attracted people here for the last few years is continuing today," said Ken Strobeck, the executive director of the League of Arizona Cities and Towns. "From our perspective, we believe we have attractive communities and cities and towns that have served our residents well and provide a great place to live."

It's also friendly to businesses, Strobeck said.

"Arizona has been a pretty attractive state for business, and our tax structure is fairly well-balanced. It's not heavy-handed on any particular kind of taxation," he said.

The new growth estimates show the majority of the population increases in Maricopa and Pinal counties were driven by out-of-state people moving to the area.

This phenomenon is playing out in neighborhoods all over the area.

Paul Abram, a 44-year-old Arizona native, just moved back to Arizona from California about a year ago. Everyone on his block in Queen Creek also moved to Arizona recently, and they all have two things in common: They came from California seeking cheaper homes.

Abram said he and his wife first tried looking in Phoenix, but even that was too expensive.

"We noticed that the housing was quite cheaper out here and we came out in this direction," he said. "When I talked to most of my neighbors, it was the same reasoning."

But the explosive growth in the East Valley also has its downsides.

"We really don't like the traffic," Abram said, noting that Queen Creek seems to have been more focused on building homes than roads.

"There's not a lot of roads to get us in and out."

David Snider, the vice chairman of the Pinal County Board of Supervisors, said he's aware of problems caused by rapid growth. There has been an increased demand for judicial and public-safety services, as well as more roads. The county has come up with 22 different transportation planning initiatives to address these concerns.

"For the most part, the East Valley is pretty much built out, believe it or not," he said. "Part of the interest is that the land is relatively less expensive than in Maricopa County, and the cost of the housing is less."

Snider said the growth is occurring in more well-established communities such as Casa Grande, but he's also seen the explosion in areas such as the city of Maricopa, which he said grew from about 1,400 people in 2000 to about 16,000 after a mid-decade census was conducted in 2005.

Other factors behind the population increases in Maricopa and Pinal counties include the fact there were more births than deaths over the last six years and an influx of residents moving into the area from outside the United States, according to census data. Maricopa County saw a net increase of 160,945 new people migrate from outside the U.S.

Ironically, the Maricopa Association of Governments also came out with its latest population estimates this week. Harry Wolfe, the senior project manager of MAG, said he was happy to see that MAG's growth estimates were similar to what the Census Bureau had found.

According to MAG's tentative estimates, the communities in the East Valley that experienced the greatest growth rate in the past year included Queen Creek, Gilbert and Chandler.

Gilbert Mayor Steve Berman said the rapid growth in the area poses a challenge for city budgets. State-shared revenues are based on population estimates, and if those numbers are too low, towns and cities don't receive as much money per resident. As a result, he said the town's had to watch its budget carefully.

"It creates a bit of a bind," he said.



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