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GROWING PAINS: MANATEE AT CROSSROADS

Area's growth will gain speed, experts predict

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PALMETTO - Attention, Manatee County: Growth is here, and it's likely to intensify in the coming years.

That was the message three experts delivered to more than 300 people who packed a forum Thursday night at the Manatee Convention and Civic Center.

The mix of demographic and economic trends that has been driving Manatee's rapid growth and led to a record housing market last year, shows no signs of abating, the experts said during the "Growing Pains: Manatee at Crossroads" forum.

"Population growth is going to ramp up," said Orlando economist Hank Fishkind, who predicted Manatee's average population growth will nearly double to 15,000 people a year during the next 15 years.

Brad Edmondson, a demographer from Ithaca, N.Y., and Tony Polito, local director for the housing market research firm Metrostudy, also gave elected officials, community and business leaders and the public a peek into Manatee's future during the three-hour forum.

An aging baby boom generation and increased immigration will be key drivers of the anticipated growth, said Edmondson, vice president of ePodunk.com, a Web site that provides in-depth information on 26,000 places in the United States.

Manatee can expect greater numbers of boomers - those born between 1946 and 1964 - retiring to the area in the coming years, Edmondson said. Immigration also will play a greater role in Manatee's growth as immigrants, who once flocked to major cities, increasingly settle in less-urban areas, he said.

"Immigration doesn't affect the Sarasota-Bradenton area much, yet," he said, noting that 500 legal immigrants settled in the area last year. "It will."

Manatee's lower housing costs, access to major highways and proximity to Tampa, St. Petersburg and the Gulf of Mexico are the major reasons people want to live here, Fishkind said.

That has resulted in a robust local housing market, Polito said. The Bradenton-Sarasota market, which includes Charlotte County, had a record 7,969 housing starts last year, he said.

"We've doubled our housing market in the last five years," Polito said. "We can't get homes built fast enough."

A combination of high consumer confidence, low interest rates and job growth will continue to fuel the local home-construction boom although the national housing market is expected to slow down slightly, he said.

To pay for growth's effects, Fishkind encouraged local officials to regularly revise and update impact fees; create special taxing districts to pay for roads, utilities and other infrastructure; and lessen reliance on residential

property taxes by maximizing other revenue sources such as gas taxes.

He also said local officials should encourage more master-planned communities such as Lakewood Ranch, tie land-use decisions with budget planning, and streamline the development approval and permitting process.

The forum was sponsored by Citizens for a Sustainable Future, begun by several business leaders last year to promote sustainable growth; the University of South Florida's Manatee-Sarasota campus; and The Herald. It was the first of several planned forums as growth - and how to manage it - continues as a hot topic both in Manatee and Florida.

Those attending Thursday's forum said they welcomed community dialogue on growth.

"I was pleased with the amount of information from different angles," said Eileen Hoffner of Palmetto. "It was very comprehensive."

Organizers plan a follow-up session that likely will focus on the county's ability to handle growth.

"Tonight set the stage for what's coming," said Rex Jensen, Schroeder-Manatee Ranch's chief executive and one of Citizens for a Sustainable Future's founders. "Next is, how do we handle it?"

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