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Brent Batten: Growth is slowing? Check the Census data

By Brent Batten

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Whew!

After 20 years at or near the top of the list of rapidly burgeoning communities, growth in Naples has finally slowed, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Ranked second as recently as 2000, Collier has fallen to 76th on the list of fast-growing counties, interim Census figures released last week tell us.

It must be that all the talk about slowing growth has finally paid off. Now we can stop adorning every road with construction barricades, lugging that 30-pound real estate section up the driveway and jacking up every impact fee.

Crisis over. Everything's under control.

Not exactly.

What the interim Census figures show, more than anything, is that Naples — if there was anyone out there who still thought it was — is no longer a small town.

Robust growth no longer catapults it to the top of the Census list, but that doesn't mean the robust growth has stopped.

In its midterm release, the Census ranks U.S. cities by rate of growth. It is a formula in which the change in population is divided by the original population and then multiplied by 100.

Smaller communities most often head the list because a relatively small number of people moving in causes a large rate of growth. None of the top 10 fast-growing counties in the latest Census report had a 2000 population of more than 200,000. Seven of the top 10 were fewer than 100,000.

A glance at the raw numbers shows that in terms of cars on roads, houses going up and faucets being tapped, growth is as prevalent as ever in Collier County.

From 1990 to 2000, Collier's population grew from 152,099 to 251,377, an increase of 99,278 people, or just fewer than 10,000 people per year, according to Census figures.

The interim report indicates that from 2000 to 2005, the population grew from 251,377 to 307,242, an increase of 55,865, or more than 11,000 people per year.

The rate of growth may have slowed, but growth has picked up.

A similar tale is told in Lee County, where rate of growth over the past five years puts the community at 63rd on the list, but where the population increased by more than 100,000.

Builders and Realtors need not fret that the boom is over.

Government leaders ought not congratulate themselves for getting a handle on growth.

What would be telling, and what the interim Census report doesn't show, is exactly who is moving here.

Anecdotally, the sense is that those of moderate income are having a difficult time affording a home in Collier County.

If as many people as ever are moving to Collier County, but fewer of those people are workers making decent but not great money, an imbalance in the demand for services and the ability to provide them is bound to occur.

The list of familiar professions in that quandary — teacher, nurse, police officer, firefighter — can be augmented with bookkeeper, computer technician, grocer, etc.

Growth is continuing unabated. The problems associated with it aren't going away, regardless of what the numbers from the Census Bureau say.

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