

Metro growth moves north

Some older suburbs saw population fall in decade's first half

By Burt Hubbard, Rocky Mountain News

June 21, 2006

As the decade reaches the halfway point, cities in the northern suburbs are booming while older areas such as Lakewood and Centennial are stagnating, according to a new Census Bureau report.

The estimates released today showed growth moved north of Denver between 2000 and 2005. Eight of the 10 fastest-growing cities were in Weld County.

"That's where all the growth is," said Senior State Demographer Jim Westkott. "Weld County is getting the Denver metro area growth."

The town of Firestone, in Weld County, saw its population more than triple to 6,410 during the first five years of the decade, making it the fastest-growing city in the state.

The next six cities on the fastest-growing list were also in Weld County. The county has become a center of affordable housing for the working class, Westkott said.

Douglas County, the growth center during the 1990s, had two cities on the top 10 list - Castle Rock and Lone Tree.

The large cities in the northern part of the state also showed hefty population gains during the first half of the decade.

Thornton saw a 28 percent jump in population to exceed 100,000, Loveland's population rose 18 percent and Fort Collins gained 8 percent during the five years.

Westkott said a variety of factors have fueled growth to the north. Denver International Airport's role as a regional force continues to grow, more jobs are moving to the north and the area from Thornton to Fort Collins is increasingly attractive to the growing ranks of retirees, he said.

Even the congestion created by the T-REX road project in the south has played a role.

"It's just another reason why a new small business might say, 'Well, why don't I locate on the north side,'" Westkott said.

The census estimates did not include demographic breakdowns of the population.

Not all parts of the Front Range saw population gains. In the metro area, the Census Bureau estimated that some of the older suburbs such as Lakewood, Centennial, Boulder and Wheat Ridge lost population during the first half of the decade.

Gary Horvarth, research analyst at the Leeds School's Business Research Division in Boulder, said Boulder is hampered by limited growth policies and high home prices.

Roger Wadnal, Lakewood's comprehensive planning and research manager, said the city is landlocked with few vacant areas for new development.

"We are pretty much an infill city," Wadnal said.

Still, he said he thinks the Census Bureau's formula for estimating the city's population may have shortchanged Lakewood.

Aurora bucked the trend. The city east of Denver posted a 7.5 percent population gain during the five years.

Bob Watkins, the city's planning director, credited new development in southeast Aurora near E-470.

"We've opened up high-quality new neighborhoods in our southeastern area since 2000," Watkins said. "Those have attracted a lot of people."

The population in the rest of the city of about 300,000 has remained steady, he said.

The census report also shows some of the growth hot spots of the 1990s faded this decade. Among towns with populations of more than 1,000, only five of the fastest-growing in the 1990s remained among the top 10 through the first half of this decade. Superior, which saw a 3,000 percent increase in the 1990s, slowed to 14.4 percent between 2000 and 2005.

Overall, Westkott said he believes that population in Colorado will continue to grow through the rest of the decade.

And starting in 2010, it will accelerate with the retirement boom.

"We've had energy in the past that has been the big driver. We've had high-tech in the past that's been a big driver. Defense has been a big driver," he said. "After 2010, we're looking at baby boomer retirees adding a new layer."

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