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## Charlotte, Raleigh among U.S. leaders in population growth

By Greg Lacour

Charlotte and Raleigh rank among the top 10 U.S. cities in population growth, and Charlotte has risen from the nation's 20th-largest city to its 19th, according to U.S. Census estimates released Wednesday.

Also, Cary, a Raleigh suburb, is the fifth-fastest-growing U.S. city of more than 100,000 people, the Census Bureau says.

They're all indicators of the Carolinas' continued growth, which experts expect to continue despite indications that a faltering economy will slow the boom, at least for a while.

According to the estimates, all major cities and towns in the Charlotte region grew between July 1, 2006, and July 1, 2007. Huntersville, Cornelius, Davidson, and Fort Mill and Rock Hill, S.C., are all showing population increases of more than 5 percent.

The Census Bureau distinguishes between growth rate and numbers of people. Charlotte, for example, grew by only 3 percent. But it gained an estimated 17,471 people, ranking it ninth among U.S. cities in number of new residents. Raleigh, with an estimated gain of 15,148, ranked 10th.

Other N.C. cities with smaller population increases had higher growth rates. Cary gained an estimated 8,259 people from 2006 to 2007. But its smaller size compared to Charlotte and Raleigh meant a high growth rate of 7.3 percent.

The estimates are "consistent with what's been going on for some time in these areas," said state demographer Bill Tillman. But the bureau's estimates are a little more than a year old, and they may not account for recent downturns in the housing and job markets, experts said.

"Right now, the growth is slowing a little bit because it's harder for people to leave where they were because they can't sell their house," said Tom Hanchett, a historian at the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte.

### Strong job growth

The bureau issues the estimates every year. They're based largely on local governments' building permit and housing unit data.

Charlotte had 17,471 more people in mid-2007 than mid-2006, according to the Census Bureau. Last year, the city also ranked ninth in population growth, gaining an estimated 14,403 people from July 1, 2005, to July 1, 2006. Raleigh ranked 12th last year.

Mark Vitner, a senior economist at Wachovia, credited strong job growth with bringing more people to the region but noted the trend is slowing with the economy.

Vitner also said the area benefited from not having housing prices surge here. "People who may have moved to Florida in the past now move to Charlotte," Vitner said.

Many of those people are Northerners.

Roland Gardner, 59, moved to Charlotte 13 months ago from Alfred, a small town in western New York state. He said he took a job offer from an old friend who owns a car-appraisal business and wanted to expand to rapidly growing Charlotte.

Gardner had lived in New York his entire life but "wanted to do something different," and now says he wouldn't dream of going back home.

"I told my family, 'If something happens to me, bury me down here. Don't bring me back to New York,'" Gardner said. "The people are friendly, the weather, I just love it here. This is like heaven for me."

### Trying to ease the strain

Still, Gardner said he has one complaint: traffic. "This area is growing faster than the roads are," he said.

Strain on the road system is one of the inevitable consequences of growth, as are pressure on schools and the water system. County commission chair Jennifer Roberts and Charlotte Mayor Pro Tem Susan Burgess said Wednesday that those are among their main areas of concern as the area grows.

Planners at the Charlotte-based Centralina Council of Governments are trying to ease the pressure through a planning effort that includes the 75 or so local governments in the Charlotte region.

The idea is to begin regional planning for infrastructure, transportation, schools and other areas likely to be affected most by continued growth, said Rebecca Yarbrough, the COG assistant director who's managing the project.

"We're trying to get them to work together to craft unified policies," Yarbrough said. "The real key is figuring out, how do we do it?"

### The annexation issue

Another factor in the growth: North Carolina's aggressive annexation laws, which allow cities to easily absorb unincorporated land and its residents.

Since 1987, the city has added an average of 13,219 people every two years through annexation, said Jonathan Wells, a program manager with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Department.

Last year, Charlotte gained about 7,000 new residents by annexing neighborhoods in southern, northern and western Mecklenburg. But state officials forecast that Wake County will surpass Mecklenburg as the state's most populous county in the next five years or so, Tillman said.

"Common sense would say Mecklenburg County's eventually going to run out of room, and people are going to live in the surrounding counties," he said. "What I don't know – and wish I did – is, what's the point at which the growth stops in Mecklenburg... I don't know. The towns can't annex into South Carolina, I know that."