

Florida expected to start adding residents again after population decline

GAINESVILLE, Fla. – March 3, 2010 – It's a small bounce, but Florida's population should rebound this year from its first loss in more than half a century in a hopeful sign for the struggling state economy, new estimates from the University of Florida (UF) show.

The Sunshine State is expected to add about 23,000 residents between April 1, 2009, and April 1, 2010, following a loss of almost 57,000 residents the previous year, according to population projections released yesterday by UF's Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"Based on changes in electric customer data, we believe Florida's population has increased slightly over the past year," says bureau Director Stan Smith who led the research. "This may be an indication the state's economy is no longer declining at the rate it had been before."

Although the state's unemployment rate remains very high, there are signs that the housing market is starting to pick up in a number of places. "It appears the state's population loss was a one-year occurrence," he says. "Even so, Florida's growth will be very slow during the early years of the new decade."

Not until 2014 or 2015 will the state return to annual population gains that are close to 300,000, the average annual increase over the past 30 to 40 years, Smith said. Population grew by more than 400,000 residents a year during the housing boom between 2003 and 2006.

The economy has such a big impact on Florida's population growth because it drives migration, Smith says. People in their 20s, 30s and 40s who move to the state for jobs are the largest group of newcomers, followed by retirees and foreign immigrants.

"Even retirees are affected by economic conditions because of the housing market," he says. "If it's difficult for them to sell their homes, they may have to delay a retirement move to Florida even if that is what they had been planning to do."

Due to the bursting of the housing bubble and the severe national recession, Florida lost more than 800,000 jobs between the fall of 2007 and the fall of 2009, and the state unemployment rate rose from about 4 to 11 percent. The declining economy led to a huge slowdown in population growth between 2007 and 2008 and a population loss between 2008 and 2009. The loss was the first since military personnel left the state at the end of World War II.

The bureau estimates the total number of state residents will grow from 18,750,000 to 18,773,000 between April 2009 and April 2010. According to long-term projections, state population is expected to reach approximately 21,247,000 in 2020, 22,574,000 in 2025, 23,821,000 in 2030, and 24,971,000 in 2035.

The biggest numerical increases forecast between 2010 and 2035 are in large counties. Orange County is projected to add the most new residents, 512,200; followed by Hillsborough, 471,800; and Miami-Dade, 457,200.

"Population growth has a lot of momentum in the sense that places that have been growing rapidly in one time period tend to grow rapidly in the following time period as well," Smith says. "Large markets attract businesses and have more opportunities to draw job seekers. Also, migrants are often attracted by social and family connections with people who moved to an area previously."

In terms of percentage increases, the biggest leaders over the next quarter century are projected to be Sumter and Flagler counties, growing by 111 percent and 109 percent, respectively.

"The main driving force to Sumter County's growth is The Villages, a huge retirement community that has been adding a large numbers of residents," Smith says. "Flagler County also has added a lot of retirees but has a rapidly growing working-age population as well."

Monroe is the only county projected to lose population over the next 25 years, declining by about 4 percent. The county has little vacant land that can be developed and the area has a high cost of living. Some counties are expected to grow quite slowly, such as Pinellas, with an expected quarter century population increase of less than 2 percent. As the state's most densely populated county, it has little available space.

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