

## **Cape Coral's growth fourth in nation U.S. Census releases 2005-06 data**

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In one year, 11,403 people moved to Cape Coral.

That 8 percent jump in population has made the Cape the fourth fastest-growing city in the United States, according to census figures released today analyzing the population of every city in the country.

None of Lee County's other cities — Fort Myers, Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel and Bonita Springs — saw much growth in that year, 2005-06.

"I'm not surprised at the growth and investment that we're seeing in the Cape," said Mike Quaintance, president of the Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce. "It's another feather in our cap."

Cape Coral placed behind Port St. Lucie; McKinney, Texas; and North Las Vegas and just above Gilbert, Ariz.

Fort Myers and Bonita Springs, each of which saw its population inch up by about 2,000 people, were no match for Cape Coral's rapid growth to 151,389 residents by last July. Bonita's total population was 40,877, while Fort Myers' was 60,531.

Meanwhile, Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel Island saw a 4 percent drop — a decline of about 250 residents for each city. Fort Myers Beach's population was 6,559, while Sanibel's population was 5,812.

Today's census figures counted only cities, not unincorporated areas, so populations for areas that have seen quick growth such as Lehigh Acres and south Fort Myers aren't available.

Cape Coral's growth helped propel it to the list of Florida's top 10 cities. It ranked ninth, just behind Tallahassee.

The new numbers could help convince more businesses — especially chains — to move into the city, Quaintance said.

"The population growth was so quick that the business growth couldn't keep up

with it," he said.

Mike Jackson, director of the city's economic development department, said the new data just solidify the city's motto as the "Growth Engine of Southwest Florida."

"This is exciting for us because it demonstrates a trend of economic and population growth," he said.

Jackson said the fast growth prompted the city to ramp up the timeline for its controversial water and sewer projects. The neighborhoods where those lines are being installed also get newly paved roads when the construction is finished, he said.

Cape Coral city officials estimate the current population at 168,698.

Commercial growth is still catching up. Since 2005, the city has attracted chain and big-box stores such as Kohl's (its first), Lowe's Home Improvement (its second), The Home Depot (its first and one of the biggest in the state) and BJ's Wholesale Club (its first).

And in the final sign that the Cape has arrived as a metropolitan player, a Starbucks is coming. There's also talk of bringing two more.

Cape's growth isn't good news for some Cape Coral residents, though.

Ralph LePera, former president of the Cape Coral Civic Association, said the growth has become overwhelming.

"Maybe it's time for a slowdown," he said. "All growth is not good."

But LePera hopes the commercial growth will continue.

"If it's just more retail and restaurants that pay low, it's not good," he said. "It would be nice to see some light industrial or even a corporation."

Cape Coral resident Wayne Hood said the city needs to look at how it grows in a smarter way.

"I think we need to improve what we have before we jump off the deep end," he said.