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## Manatee bucks Fla. population decline

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MANATEE — Florida's first population loss in more than six decades was centered in counties hardest-hit by the housing crash and recession, but Manatee County was not among them, according to preliminary estimates released Wednesday.

An estimated 318,404 people lived in Manatee as of April 1, a gain of 705 people from a year earlier, the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research said.

Manatee was among 32 Florida counties to gain residents, the bureau said. But declines in the other 35 counties — including Sarasota — dropped Florida's overall population by more than 58,000 people, the first decline since large numbers of military personnel left the state in 1946 after the end of World War II.

"It does speak well for Manatee County that, while the state as a whole has lost people, Manatee was one of the counties that gained," said Bob Bartz, president of the Manatee Chamber of Commerce.

Nearly all of Manatee's population growth was in unincorporated areas such as Lakewood Ranch and Parrish. Those areas were home to an estimated 238,835 people, an increase of 906 from April 1 of last year.

Local officials said the majority of new housing construction continues to be in those areas, which remain major draws for commuters who work in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Sarasota counties.

But populations fell in four of Manatee's six cities: Anna Maria (42), Bradenton (133), Longboat Key (14 in the Manatee portion) and Palmetto (28). Bradenton Beach and Holmes Beach registered miniscule gains of 9 and 7 residents, respectively.

One island city official questioned the figures.

"I'm very surprised because it's an inordinate amount," said Anna Maria Mayor Fran Barford, whose city's population had changed little in prior years. "It just seems to be an unusually high number."

Barford suggested that unincorporated parts of Anna Maria Island might have been mistakenly included in her city's estimate.

Officials of the bureau, which bases its annual estimates on utility hookups, homestead exemptions and other criteria, did not immediately return calls.

But Bradenton Mayor Wayne Poston took a positive view.

"With the unemployment rate that we're facing in Manatee County, I'm surprised that the number wasn't higher," he said of his city's estimated population loss. "All in all, it's a pretty good number."

Sarasota County had the state's eighth-largest decline, losing 4,288 people from 2008 to 2009, the bureau said. The biggest losses were in the unincorporated area and the city of Sarasota, which now has fewer residents than Bradenton — 53,160 compared to Bradenton's 54,051.

"Unfortunately, the population loss doesn't surprise me," said Steve Queior, the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce's president and chief executive. "It's heavily related to job losses and the difficulties in the housing market."

The same can be said for counties that led the state in population losses, the bureau said. Broward lost the most people (13,904), followed by Lee (8,601), Palm Beach (8,033) and Pinellas (7,348). Hillsborough lost 3,649 people, 10th-most in the state.

“The population decline is really a reflection of how severe the national recession has been,” Stan Smith, the bureau’s director, said in a statement. “Traditionally, Florida’s growth has been spurred by both a booming economy and a booming housing market, and both have seen substantial losses over the last couple of years.”

On the flip side, Alachua County gained the most people (3,844) followed by Lake (3,614) and St. Johns (2,320). Being home to the University of Florida has helped fuel Alachua’s growth, while Lake is home to The Villages, a large and rapidly growing retirement community.

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