



Mat-ZOOM

Area still leads state in growth

January 27, 2005

DARRELL L. BREESE/Frontiersman reporter

MAT-SU - The Mat-Su Valley is known for growing things on a large scale. Giant vegetables displayed at the Alaska State Fair routinely make headlines and demonstrate the richness of the soil, which aids the rapid growth of cabbages and squash.

But enormous vegetables aren't the only thing growing in the Valley - the population is growing, as well.

The Mat-Su region is still the fastest-growing area of the state, according to a report released Wednesday by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. The ever-increasing population rose 4.9 percent during the last year, pushing the total number of Valley residents beyond 74,000.

Alaska demographer Greg Williams indicated that the growth is nothing new for the Valley.

"The trend shows there has been steady growth since the mid-1980s in the region," Williams said. "Since 1990,

the Mat-Su area has been the fastest-growing part of the state, and there is no indication that things will slow down any time soon."

The Mat-Su Borough made up 35.2 percent of the state's population gains - a 4.9 percent increase over the last five years. In the 2000-2005 period, it grew at an average annual rate of 4.2 percent, which is comparable to its 4.0 percent annual growth rate during the 1990s.

Since 1990, the population in the Mat-Su Valley has nearly doubled, increasing from 39,683 to 74,041. A growth rate that was slightly slower than the 5.0 percent growth in the same period for the United States as a whole.

John Schoonover, who moved to the Valley a year ago, is one of the nearly 4,000 people who have recently moved to the Valley. He came to the area from Eagle River because of the rising prices and lack of availability of properties suitable for his family in the state's largest city.

"I wanted a little elbow room, and Eagle River was growing too fast," Schoonover said. "And I wanted to get away from the chaos of the city. I paid a whole lot less for my home here than I got when I sold my home. With the 2 acres that came with it, I can keep all my family's toys close to home and not in storage."

Schoonover and others who moved from other parts of the state to the Mat-Su represent the largest bloc of the current growth spurt. Since the 2000 census, it is estimated that 11,634 of the Mat-Su's population increase of 14,719 was due to in-state migration. Over the last year, Mat-Su gained 2,878 in-state migrants, while Anchorage lost 2,883.

"There is a trend in the state for people to move from rural communities to the urban centers," Williams said. "But the urban centers have overgrown their capacity, sending people to the areas like the Valley. The report shows that people are shifting where they live in the state, away from the rural areas and to the suburban area of the Valley."

Larry Ficek, a Realtor with Re/Max of Wasilla, said there is a broad mix of people coming to the Valley.

"The majority of the homes we're selling are to families," Ficek said. "Maybe 50 percent. The next largest group is young couples buying their first home, maybe 40 percent. There is also a significant number of seniors and retirees moving to the Valley, as well."

Ficek echoed the reports finding that people are moving to the Valley from Anchorage.

"The number-one reason people are moving here is because the dollar goes farther up here," Ficek said. "You can get more home for your dollar than in Anchorage."

Neal Fried, a state economist, said the growth in the Valley is occurring because of a strong economic base.

"The proximity to Anchorage and the growth of both the Anchorage and local economy make the Mat-Su area attractive to people looking for a new place to live," Fried said.

Schoonover, who works for the Veterans Administration, commutes daily to his job on the north side of Anchorage, as do many of the new residents to the Valley.

"If you want to see the growth, all you have to do is look at the cars on the Glenn Highway during the morning commute," Schoonover said. "Sometimes I think both the cars and the growth are going too fast."

Of the 35 places in the state with populations of more than 2,000, 12 experienced growth, and all but two are located in the Mat-Su Borough. All of the other boroughs and census areas in the state decreased in population.

The Knik-Fairview area recorded the largest rate of increase (7.1 percent), followed by the city of Homer (6.0), and the Fishhook area (6.0). The Ketchikan Gateway Borough was the only other non-Mat-Su area to show an increase.

There appears to be no end in sight to the current growth trend in the area, Fried said.

"Looking at the long-term trends, I would project continued growth in the Mat-Su Valley," he said. "But these things are hard to predict. As long as there continues to be 1 to 1 1/2 percent annual economic growth, the Valley can expect to experience a moderate rate of growth for the next several years."

