

# Up, Up, Up!

## Florida's growth machine fuels population rise, especially in Sumter County's small towns.

By **RACHEL WHETSTONE**  
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### THE VILLAGES

The cities around The Villages may be small, but their populations are growing faster than most other municipalities across Florida.

Latest U.S. Census estimates being released today show that Florida towns grew by 1.48 percent on average, as of July 1, 2015. Locally, Wildwood, Fruitland Park and Lady Lake all grew faster: 4.85 percent, 2.14 percent and 1.82 percent, respectively.

Wildwood even beat out Fort Myers, whose 4.4 percent jump made it the only Florida city on the Census list of the nation's top 15 fastest-growing cities with a population of 50,000 or higher.

Wildwood added 305 people last year, raising its population to 6,590. Fruitland Park picked up

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# 1.48%

The average population growth of all Florida towns last year

# 4.85%

**Wildwood's** population growth is more than twice the state average. Its industrial sector is on the upswing, with nearly all industrial space occupied.

# 2.14%

**Fruitland Park** also grew faster than the state average. The completion of 2,100 new homes in The Villages section is expected soon.

# 1.82%

**Lady Lake** also grew faster than the state average. A boom in commercial growth has lured workers to their new jobs.

# 2.99%

Orlando population growth

# 2.51%

Tampa population growth

# 1.53%

Jacksonville population growth

# 10.31%

Growth in Groveland, located in southern Lake County, saw the highest percent increase in the state.

# 4.43%

Population growth in Fort Myers, the only Florida city on the list of the nation's top 15 fastest-growing cities with a population of 50,000 or more

Illustration by Grace Stamper, Daily Sun



# GROWTH

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94 residents, rising to 4,483 people. Lady Lake, population 14,717, added 263 new residents, according to the Census.

All three towns are well-positioned to keep growing at similar or greater rates in years ahead, officials said.

## HOMES, INDUSTRY BOOST WILDWOOD

"For Wildwood, this was not unexpected," said Bradley Arnold, Sumter County administrator.

Wildwood's growth from 2014 to 2015 was driven by the continued commercial and residential development in and around The Villages, he said Wednesday.

This is a trend likely to continue over the next few years with construction of the 1,000-acre Village of Fenney within Wildwood city limits, 3 miles south of Brownwood.

Additionally, the city's industrial sector is on the upswing.

"If you go to any of the industrial parks in Wildwood, you'll see that almost every building is occupied and in production," Arnold said.

## CITY POISED FOR TAKEOFF

Although Fruitland Park's growth trailed other area towns in 2015, city officials expect a much faster pace over the next few years.

"We anticipate that number to be much larger in 2016 and considerably larger in 2017," City Manager Gary LaVenia said Wednesday.

The completion of 2,100 new homes in The Villages portion of Fruitland Park in the next few years is expected to bump up the city's population to more than 8,000 people.

"We will see the fruits of this as people start moving into the new homes in The Villages," LaVenia said.

## LADY LAKE LIKES THE TREND

Kris Kollgaard, town manager of Lady Lake, is pleased with the town's steady growth, she said.

"We usually have a slow, steady pace," she said. "This allows us to not have to sacrifice the level of service to our residents. The numbers show growth, and that's a good thing."

The continued growth in town is likely because of commercial growth, which is bringing in employees who may choose to live in Lady Lake, Kollgaard said.

"Also, I hope this means that a lot of the homes that were vacant before are now occupied," she said.

## SMALL TOWNS, BIG GAINS

Further south in Sumter, two other small towns also are showing growth spurts. Center Hill grew by 4.92 percent and Webster by 4.74 percent, the Census Bureau said.

A Cutrale nursery and new Family Dollar and Dollar General stores have brought jobs to Webster, which is known mostly for its weekly farmers market. Much of

Center Hill's growth can be attributed to increased activity at the Cemex mine and the Central Beef expansion that took place before the packing house closed down.

"For Webster and Center Hill, this was our hope, with agribusiness and other businesses recently locating there and flourishing," Arnold said.

Both cities have small populations — 1,194 in Center Hill and 995 in Webster, according to Census estimates — so the addition of 56 people in the first and 45 in the second has a significant impact in terms of percentage increase, he said.

However, these numbers do not reflect the impact of Central Beef's closure, which it announced in March and is eliminating more than 200 jobs, Arnold said. Whether someone steps forward to buy and reopen the packing house will be a major factor in next year's population figures.

"We are very hopeful that it will be up and operating again," he said.

The county is offering potential buyers an incentive of \$200,000 if they will acquire the business and hire at least 200 employees, Arnold said.

## WEBSTER MAYOR HAS DREAMS

Mayor Kelly Williams is working hard to bring people to Webster, and the city just completed a new master plan.

One factor in the growth has been offering alternative types of housing, such as multi-family, duplexes and mixed-use properties, in addition to single-family homes, Williams said. The next step is working on the land development code and improving infrastructure.

Additionally, Williams aims to bring the Coast-to-Coast connector trail to Webster and make the town a destination city for bikers and hikers. The 250-mile trail would connect shorter trails across Florida from St. Petersburg to Titusville. Webster is in the gap between the Withlacoochee Trail and the Van Fleet Trail.

"It would be a great tourism draw," Williams said. "It would bring in a lot of people,

and they have to stay the night somewhere and go somewhere to eat."

## BELLEVIEW ON THE RISE

The Census estimates point to new life in Belleview, just north of The Villages. It grew 1.93 percent in 2015 after near-stagnant growth a few years ago.

From 2010 to 2011, Belleview added three people. Then 11 more in 2012 and 15 in 2013. But 2014 projections showed 112 people moved to town, and then 90 more this year pushed the population to 4,765.

Mayor Christine Dobkowski said more available housing has a lot to do with the growth. New townhouses and apartment complexes offer affordable housing and are attractive to younger people, she said.

Additionally, there is a lot more happening in southern Marion County, she said.

"We've got new jobs because we've added new businesses like Ace Hardware, Zaxby's and Hardee's," she said. "While those aren't huge places, they've added between 100 and 200 new jobs."

Some new Belleview residents also may want to be close to work in The Villages, Dobkowski said.

"The Villages has a lot of work for a lot of different types of businesses," she said.

Dobkowski said she definitely considers Belleview to be included in the rapidly growing part of the county. Much of

this is due to the patronage of Villagers.

"We've got new businesses opening up everywhere," she said. "Village Ford at the south end of town says almost 100 percent of their customers are from The Villages, and many local restaurant owners have said many of their patrons are Villagers. That's important and has helped our economy."

## MODEST GROWTH IN BIG CITIES

Large Florida cities saw modest growth in 2015. Nearly 8,000 people moved to Orlando, raising the estimated population to 270,934, an increase of 2.99 percent. Tampa, with a population of 369,075, grew by 2.51 percent, and Miami, with 441,003 residents, added almost 10,000 people and grew at a rate of 2.23 percent.

Jacksonville remains the most populous city in Florida with 868,031 people, and is the 12th-most populated city in the country. It grew by slightly more than 13,000 people last year, a 1.53 percent increase.

Southern Lake County has some of the fastest growth in the state. Groveland grew by 10.31 percent in 2015, the highest percentage increase in Florida, according to the Census Bureau. Clermont had a 5.83 percent growth rate.

Other big gainers in Florida include Davenport

at 9.48 percent, Bal Harbour Village at 8.98 percent, Parkland at 7.24 percent and Ocoee at 5.89 percent.

Nearby, Ocala and Leesburg grew by 1.22 percent and 2.16 percent, respectively.

A lot of the country's fastest growth was seen in Texas, which had five cities: Georgetown, New Braunfels, Frisco, Pearland and Pflugerville, on the national top 15 list of fastest-growing cities with 50,000 people or more.

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