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AREA STILL GROWING

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BY JONAS BEALS

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Though population growth continues in the Fredericksburg region, the rate has slowed significantly during the recession.

Stafford and Spotsylvania counties are now near the bottom of the 100 fastest-growing counties in the nation, based on newly released U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Both counties have frequently been in the top half of that list during the past two decades, but now have annual growth rates below 2 percent.

"At least it's not a reversal of positive growth," said Kevin Byrnes, director of regional planning for the George Washington Regional Commission. "It provides some optimism that the area will come out of the downturn pretty well."

Byrnes said that the recent growth slowdown should serve as a reality check for planners who had predicted future growth based on annual rates of 6 to 8 percent from earlier in the decade. But he urged caution.

"It leaves open the possibility that we'll see some resurgence of past trends, so we don't have to totally throw out the long-range planning we've been doing," Byrnes said.

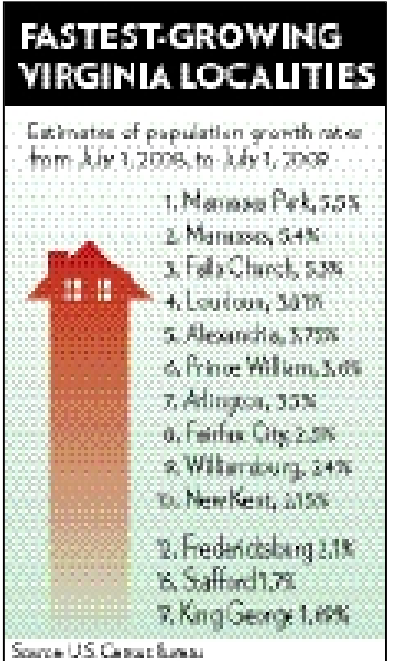
That slow growth has hit local governments in their wallets. Revenue derived from new houses, building permits and accompanying sales tax has dwindled, leading to budget cuts and layoffs.

Despite the constricted cash flow, slower growth could be a blessing.

"It will allow us to catch up on planning and infrastructure," Stafford County Administrator Anthony Romanello said. "Previous growth happened at such a rapid rate that it was difficult for us to keep up with the pace."

Romanello said the sour economy is stunting job growth, which has led to fewer people relocating to the area.

That could change because of decisions at the federal level. Romanello mentioned the Base Realignment and Closure Commission's plans to move 2,900 jobs to Marine Corps Base Quantico in the next few years. The move could boost population in the region, especially in Stafford and Prince William counties.



State figures show that last year's population growth is focused in the urban areas of Northern Virginia--a trend that coincides with higher employment figures for that metro area.

Eight of the 10 fastest-growing localities in Virginia last year were urban areas close to the federal government in Washington.

Locally, the trend is also toward urban areas.

The City of Fredericksburg outpaced both Stafford and Spotsylvania counties in terms of growth rate last year at 2.1 percent, or 476 people. However, Stafford, with a 1.7 percent increase, added the most people in the region with 2,076.

Byrnes said that those figures differ slightly from data provided by the Weldon Cooper Center at the University of Virginia. The Cooper center estimate was nearly 3,000 higher than the Census Bureau's for the region, and Fredericksburg's growth was not quite as robust. He said the difference may lie in ZIP code information that may have attributed some growth in Spotsylvania and Stafford to the city instead.

On both accounts, the region's smallest county was the fastest-growing.

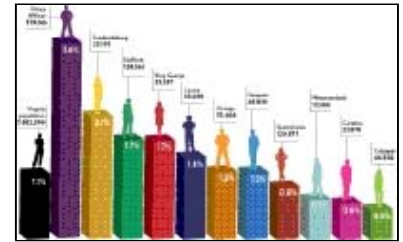
King George County, with its modest population of 23,557, actually has the second-highest 10-year growth rate in the state behind Loudoun County, a large Northern Virginia locality that is ranked fifth in the nation.

A number of rural counties and cities in Virginia lost residents in 2009. Many of them are concentrated in the southern and western parts of the state.

Fairfax County remains Virginia's largest, adding more than 18,000 new residents last year to stay just over the 1 million mark. It is the 37th most-populated county in the country.

Bath County, Virginia's second smallest county, has the lowest growth rate. With an estimated population of 4,482, Bath lost 90 residents. Only neighboring Highland County, with 2,338 residents, is smaller.

Jonas Beals: 540/368-5036
 Email: jbeals@freelancestar.com



Fastest Growing Counties in the United States based on Census Bureau population estimates from April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2009, with growth rate percentage

1. Kendall County, Ill. - 92.1
2. Pinal County, Az. - 89.7
3. Rockwall County, Texas - 88.9
4. Flagler County, Fla. - 83.9
5. Loudoun County, Va. - 77.6

6. Forsyth County, Ga. - 77.4
7. Lincoln County, S.D. - 70.7
8. Paulding County, Ga. - 67.4
9. Williamson County, Texas - 64.3
10. Douglas County, Colo. - 64

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57. King George County, Va. - 40.2
 82. Culpeper County, Va. - 35.7
 87. Prince William County, Va. - 34.8
 90. New Kent County, Va. - 34.5
 93. Stafford County, Va. - 34.3
 97. Spotsylvania County, Va. - 33.8

Annual Growth rates for counties in our region, based on Census Bureau estimates from July 1, 2008 to July 1, 2009

Virginia

2008 population: 7,795,424

2009 population: 7,882,590

1.12%

Prince William County

2008 population: 366,092

2009 population: 379,166

3.57%

Fredericksburg City

2008 population: 22,717

2009 population: 23,193

2.10%

Stafford County

2008 population: 122,090

2009 population: 124,166

1.70%

King George

2008 population: 23,165

2009 population: 23,557

1.69%

Louisa

2008 population: 32,621

2009 population: 33,078

1.40%

Orange

2008 population: 33,214

2009 population: 33,600

1.16%

Fauquier

2008 population: 67,240

2009 population: 68,010

1.15%

Spotsylvania County

2008 population: 120,015

2009 population: 120,977

0.80%

Westmoreland County

2008 population: 17,564

2009 population: 17,686

0.69%

Caroline

2008 population: 27,699

2009 population: 27,870

0.62%

Culpeper

2008 population: 46,264

2009 population: 46,502

0.51%

ECONOMY'S IMPACT

While Washington remains an economic engine, the pace of population growth in the Fredericksburg area has slowed considerably compared with earlier in the decade. These Census Bureau numbers show the estimated population as of last summer. The percentages in the chart below reflect the population growth between July 1, 2008, and July 1, 2009.

Top annual growth rates in the state, based on Census Bureau estimates from July 1, 2008 to July 1, 2009

1. Manassas Park City - 5.54%
2. Manassas City - 5.36%
3. Falls Church City - 5.27%
4. Loudoun County - 3.81%
5. Alexandria City - 3.75%
6. Prince William County - 3.57%
7. Arlington County - 3.47%
8. Fairfax City - 2.49%
9. Williamsburg City - 2.35%
10. New Kent County - 2.15%