

S.C. shrinks as Watsonville grows

Census Census report shows changes in population

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The city of Santa Cruz, the county's 137-year-old namesake and the largest city on the Central Coast, has long occupied the spotlight in Santa Cruz County.

But some say this won't always be the case.

Watsonville grew 45 percent during the 1990s and continues to grow, attracting more state dollars and demanding more services, while the population of Santa Cruz has declined.

U.S. Census data released today reveals that Santa Cruz city lost residents between July 2000 and July 2002. The report cites a -1.4 percent growth rate during the two-year period, making it the state's 11th slowest growing — and actu-

ally shrinking — city.

The U.S. Census annually surveys the state's 357 cities with populations of more than 10,000.

The population of Santa Cruz, according to the new census report, was 53,836 in July 2002.

Meanwhile, Watsonville's growth rate during the same two-year period was 0.4 percent, bringing its total to 46,644 as of July 2002, according to the figures.

"And you'll see a spike soon because of the developments that are under construction," said John Doughty, Watsonville's community development director.

He expects about 1,000 new units, each housing at least three people, to go up during the next three to four years.

As for when and if the city's population would surpass that of Santa Cruz, Doughty couldn't say. With Watsonville's land area at 7 square miles, he expects the population to begin stabilizing after major developments take root at Bay Breeze and Vista Montaña.

Santa Cruz planning officials don't envision much long-term growth either, an expectation corroborated in the new census figures.

"We really don't have room left to grow," said city Senior Planner Laura Spidell.

At the same time, the city's high cost of real estate and weak economy have prompted some to leave the region.

Spidell says the city's proportion of younger and senior residents has fallen or remained steady in the past decade, while the proportion of baby boomers — ages 45 to 64 — has increased dramatically.

Like Santa Cruz, other cities with negative growth rates were also in places where less financially sound residents are known to struggle. Most of the cities are in the San Francisco Bay Area, including many on the Peninsula, such as Palo Alto, Menlo Park and San Carlos.

"These are all cities that have been built out or are in areas where it's difficult to build, and expensive to build," said Andrew Ruppenstein, a state Department of Finance research program specialist.

Meanwhile, inland cities like Tracy, Manteca and Los Banos, according to the census report, are among those experiencing the highest rates of population growth. This is the result of lower building costs and relatively few restrictions,

Ruppenstein said.

State funding is at risk in cities with low growth. Valuable sources of revenue for local governments, such as motor vehicle license fees and gas taxes, are allocated based on population, meaning larger cities get more.

Dave Culver, Santa Cruz finance director, said changes in such revenue sources, though, would be negligible and unlikely to affect local services.

The census data released this week paints a slightly different picture than population figures kept by the state's Department of Finance.

The state's latest figures put the population of Santa Cruz at 55,633 in January, which represents a one-year growth rate of 1.7 percent.

In Watsonville, state figures put the January population at 47,701, representing 0.2 percent growth compared to the prior year.

U.S. Census figures peg the population of Scotts Valley at 11,438, while the state puts it at 11,625.

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