

Charlotte region's boom gains steam

Newcomers fuel growth of 300,000 people over past six years

Union Co. continues to be among nation's hottest spots, ranking No. 15 in growth rate

By KYTJA WEIR

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Newcomers propelled the Charlotte region to its fastest growth spurt in years, according to 2006 U.S. census data released today.

The boom was more than even state experts anticipated, signaling continued pressure on schools, roads and public safety agencies as communities struggle to adapt.

The tension comes as North Carolina netted more than 800,000 people from 2000 until last July, with about 300,000 added to the Charlotte region.

The growth exceeded state projections, but North Carolina's demographer Bill Tillman was not surprised where it hit.

"The places that had been growing just grew a little faster," Tillman said.

The hottest regions in the Carolinas continue to be bedroom communities around Charlotte, the Triangle and Myrtle Beach, the data show. Virginia's growing Norfolk-Virginia Beach community is also spilling over into North Carolina's coastal Camden and Currituck counties.

Around Charlotte, several counties within commuting distance of the city grew even faster than Mecklenburg County itself.

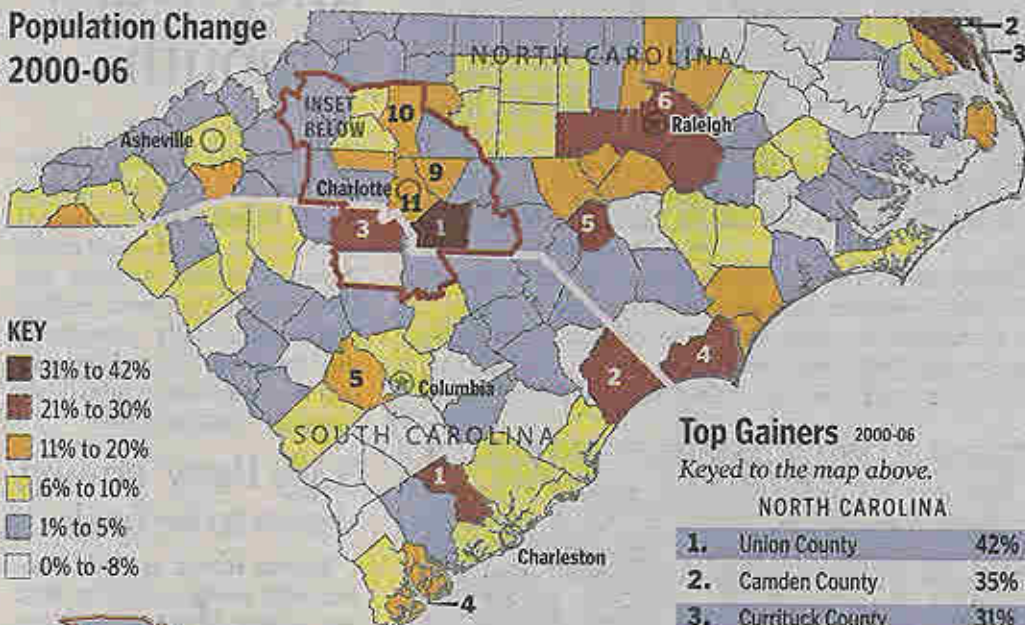
Union's rate outpaced the region and also climbed four rungs to become the nation's 15th fastest growing big county since 2000. York County, S.C., followed as the region's second-fastest growing county. Next: Cabarrus, Iredell, then Mecklenburg.

Halima Ullah, 24, is among those driving the numbers. She heard positive things about Charlotte's reputation when she lived in Maryland during her four-year enlistment in the Air Force.

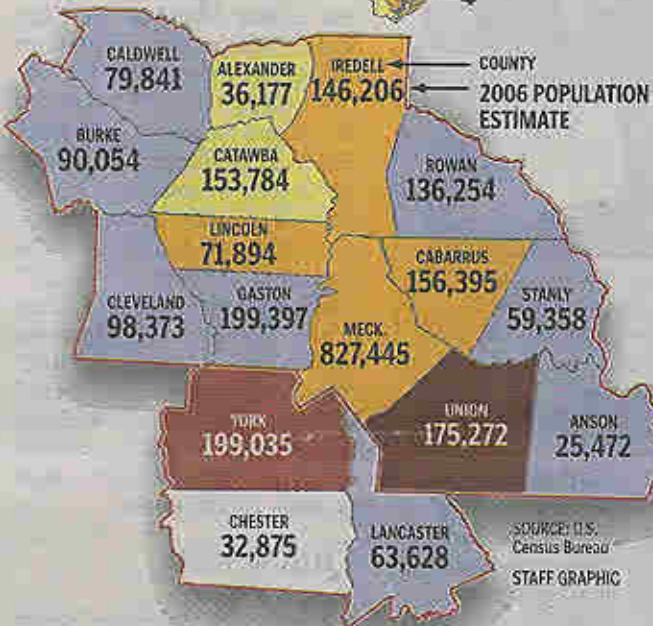
Her moving van arrived Wednesday at the three-bedroom home she's renting with two roommates in Ballantyne. A roommate recommended the area, she said, so she found the place by Googling rentals in the 28277 ZIP code.

"Charlotte's supposed to be up and coming," she said. "I've heard people talk about how

Population Change 2000-06



KEY
 ■ 31% to 42%
 ■ 21% to 30%
 ■ 11% to 20%
 ■ 6% to 10%
 ■ 1% to 5%
 ■ 0% to -8%



Top Gainers 2000-06

Keyed to the map above.

NORTH CAROLINA		
1.	Union County	42%
2.	Camden County	35%
3.	Currituck County	31%
4.	Brunswick County	30%
5.	Hoke County	26%
6.	Wake County	25%
9.	Cabarrus County	19%
10.	Iredell County	19%
11.	Mecklenburg County	19%
SOUTH CAROLINA		
1.	Dorchester County	24%
2.	Horry County	21%
3.	York County	21%
4.	Beaufort County	17%
5.	Lexington County	11%

N.C. boasts 5 of the nation's 100 fastest growing large counties, with Union climbing four rungs to No. 15 from No. 19 since 2000.



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Halima Ullah tries to determine how to fit her furniture into her new Ballantyne apartment on Wednesday. The Maryland transplant is one of the latest additions to this region's boom.

MORE COVERAGE | 11A

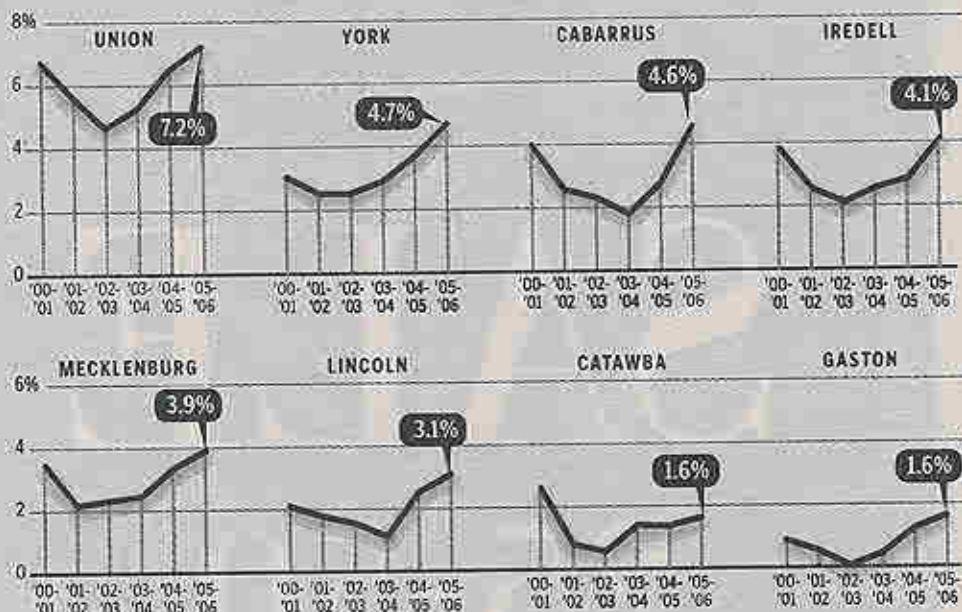
- Read why newcomers to Charlotte moved here from places such as New York and Prince Georges County, Md.
- See year-by-year growth rates in area counties.

Online Extras Read more about the growth around the region at WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/news

Growth Rate Bounce

After a dip in 2001 and 2002, the population growth rate in Charlotte-area counties has risen the past few years.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau
STAFF CHARTS



Charlotte's boom blasts projections

Growth from 1A

beautiful it is."

Booming burbs

Births account for some growth, outpacing deaths in the region, but most of the increase comes from newcomers such as Ullah.

Some who move here credit affordable housing, mild winters and job opportunities as what attracted them to the Charlotte area.

But not every county in the area could offer enough enticements. South Carolina's Chester County shrank almost 4 percent from 2000 to 2006, losing a net of almost 1,200 people. The population in still-rural Anson County remains mostly untouched by Charlotte's boom and stayed relatively steady.

However, the growth rates are based on percentages. Counties with smaller populations can show more dramatic growth rates by adding or losing a relatively small number of people. Large counties, by contrast, can absorb thousands of people without showing a big spike.

For example, Union's growth rate was more than twice Mecklenburg's, with 42 percent versus 19 percent over six years. But Union added almost 52,000 people during that time compared with Mecklenburg's more than 130,000 people.

In terms of raw numbers, Mecklenburg's increase is the equivalent of twice the population of Asheville picking up and moving to Charlotte.

Yet experts say it makes sense that growth is spilling into Charlotte's neighboring counties faster.

In addition to affordable land ripe for subdivisions, many say the lower tax rates and strong schools also drive some of the population to outlying counties.

"I absolutely saw it coming,"

Going Up

■ Overall, N.C. grew 10.1 percent in six years, while S.C. grew 7.7 percent.

■ 827,445: As the state's most populous county, Mecklenburg County broke the 800,000 mark for the first time in 2006.

■ Wake County is growing faster than Mecklenburg; it's population is expected to exceed Mecklenburg's by 2016.

■ In 13 rural counties, including a cluster in the inland northeast part of the state, the population actually shrank from 2000 to 2006.

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau; 2000-2006 population estimates; N.C. State Demographer Bill Tillman.

said Catherine Marie, an Allen Tate agent for 12 years who helped a couple with their home contract Wednesday outside of Union's Wesley Chapel community. "It's the volume of land available versus Mecklenburg, and the lower taxation... and still the proximity to urban amenities."

Growing pains

But all that growth requires more houses, more schools and more roads. That's causing some headaches for communities struggling to keep up:

■ Mecklenburg County posted a record number of building permits last year, with 18,089 housing units authorized, compared with 13,412 in 2005. In Cornelius, officials passed a moratorium stopping many new residential developments so they can plan for the future.

■ Union County officials warn that a 17-cent property tax increase will be necessary over the next four years to pay for school construction. And the state stopped new permits at the county's biggest sewer plant this winter - effectively halting future

building - until Union can expand the plant.

■ York County is considering requiring developers to contribute to public services such as schools if they want to build more homes.

Experts anticipate more of the same.

The state was already slated to add more than 3 million people by 2030 to reach more than 12 million. The census estimates exceeded Tillman's projections by about 30,000 statewide. Now he said he needs to adjust the long-range forecast.

But economic events could change everything. Tillman noted the housing market tanked in the rest of the country last year, but North Carolina's market continued to boom.

"Are we behind or did we miss it?" he asked. — DATABASE EDITOR TED MELLNIK AND STAFF WRITERS LEIGH DYER, JULIA OLIVER AND DEBORAH HIRSCH CONTRIBUTED.

Newcomer Voices

GENTRY KIRBY

Moved from: Port Chester, N.Y., in June 2006.

Where he's living: Near Ballantyne.

Why here? Family connections, another common newcomer draw, brought Kirby here. He remembers spending summers in Statesville with relatives in the 1970s. His mother moved here nine years ago to live near Ballantyne Country Club. So he followed to be closer to her - and to find a less stressful pace of life than he had in New York, he said. Of the 50 or 60 homes in his part of the Providence Pointe subdivision, he's only met one person there who's actually from Charlotte instead of a transplant. He's enjoyed the lower auto insurance rates and lower property taxes. He likes being close to shopping and golf.



Kirby

SHER ARMSTRONG

Moved from: Binghamton, N.Y., in May 2005.

Where she's living: Indian Trail.

Why here? Like many newcomers from the Northeast, better weather was a big draw for Armstrong and her husband, who were tired of shoveling driveways in winter. "We wanted a place that had Southern hospitality, that's not so big that people become cold and unfeeling to each other," she said. They chose Indian Trail before they knew where they'd be working. She ended up with a job in uptown Charlotte, while her husband works on the southwest side. Commutes take about 40 minutes, versus 13 or so in Binghamton.

"I kind of wish there was more of a direct way. Traffic is really heavy," she said.



Armstrong

DONALD AND CARMEN CORBIN

Moved from: Not here yet, but plan to move by summer from Prince Georges County, Md., to Union County.

Why here? The Corbins met Wednesday to sign a contract on a house in the St. John's Forest subdivision just outside Wesley Chapel, a rapidly growing suburb in Union County. Cows graze next to the 450-acre development, which has lots for 637 houses. Prices range from the \$150,000s to the \$260,000s. Both retired recently, and they chose the Charlotte region on the recommendation of a friend who lives in Union County. They were drawn by what many newcomers say brings them here: a reputation for a good quality of life. "We wanted close to a city, but still not in the hustle and bustle," Donald Corbin said. They like the housing prices, lower taxes and good schools - their grandson will be living with them and attending pre-kindergarten, they said. As sports fans, they're looking forward to checking out the Charlotte Bobcats NBA team and the Carolina Panthers NFL team. "This is pretty much what we want for right now in our life," Corbin said.

— LEIGH DYER