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Business

Bay continues to grow despite recession

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PANAMA CITY — Bay County's population crept up last year despite the worst recession in decades, according to U.S. Census Bureau data released this week.

"The growing population areas are the ones who tend to attract new jobs," said Janet Watermeier, county Economic Development Alliance executive director. "I believe this is our decade."

Population trends indicate how healthy a local economy is, said Dr. Stan Smith, the Population Studies program director at the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research. People tend to leave when jobs evaporate and the economy sours, but both census and state numbers show a slight increase in residents since 2008.

"It's pretty clear that economic recessions and boom times have an impact on Florida population growth," Smith said.

The Census has not released numbers for cities, but Smith's bureau reported city and county numbers last year.

Unincorporated Bay County saw a 9 percent increase in population as of April 1, 2009, compared to the same time a year ago, according to the UF numbers. Several cities lost population, including Callaway

Area population

County	Federal numbers		State numbers	
	July 1, '08	July 1, '09	April 1, '08	April 1, '09
Bay	163,802	164,767	169,307	169,562
Franklin	11,247	11,280	12,331	12,414
Gulf	15,683	15,755	16,923	16,798
Holmes	19,170	19,099	19,757	19,857
Jackson	50,915	50,930	52,639	52,637
Walton	53,920	55,105	57,784	57,917
Washington	23,916	23,994	24,779	24,721
Florida	18,537,969	18,423,878	18,807,219	18,750,483

Source: U.S. Census
Bureau estimatesSource: Bureau of Economic and Business
Research, University of Florida

and Parker, while Panama City Beach and Lynn Haven saw gains. Panama City lost 49 residents.

The state began tracking population trends in the 1970s when the U.S. Census Bureau didn't track city populations consistently. Economists consider the state's numbers more accurate than federal numbers, which are often low, Smith said.

Federal numbers are about 1 percent lower for Florida than the state's findings, but numbers fluctuate depending on the county, Smith said. The Census' population numbers are nearly 3 percent lower for Bay County than what Smith's bureau found.

"The main advantage of having the states do this, at least in Florida, is greater accuracy, more timely information and allowing for greater input from cities and counties,"

Smith said.

The state estimates are used for distributing state revenue-sharing dollars to cities and counties and for budgeting, planning and policy analysis by state and local governments, businesses, researchers and the public. State numbers are used in between years the Census is reported, Smith said. Next year, legislators will base decisions on the U.S. Census, which also are used to carve up congressional districts every 10 years.

The Census Bureau is considering factoring in states' numbers for the final count, Smith said.

Smith said the census data is lower because county estimates are based on matching return addresses on federal income tax returns, which misses foreign

immigrants and people who don't file two consecutive years. The state uses building permits and electric customers, while the federal numbers are based on births, deaths and migration, Smith said.

A Census spokeswoman referred all questions to the Census' media center, which did not return a call Thursday.

Despite state and federal data differences, both reports show population growth. That means Bay County is in a good position to recover from the recession, Watermeier said.

Watermeier, who uses state figures for planning, said growth is good as long as it is quality and controlled growth. Stable population growth means more business, more and higher-paying jobs and more wealth for the community in general, she said. Smith said businesses should watch closely because population trends indicate a coming demand in services and goods.

Bay County is expected to continue to grow as companies look to locate near the new international airport, Watermeier said. At least two companies have expressed an interest in the airport's planned industrial park. St. Joe Co., which owns property to be developed for commercial, industrial and retail space, recently announced it will relocate its corporate headquarters from Jacksonville to the new airport.