

ATLANTA POPULATION BOOM TURNS INWARD

By CHRISTOPHER QUINN

Morgan and Deirdre McClure are looking to buy their first home. And though they haven't found the house of their dreams, they have identified the place they want it to be. Intown Atlanta.

Though Atlanta's suburbs continue to add residents at a rapid pace, the McClures are among a growing group bypassing them to move into the city.

The metro Atlanta region grew by 111,700 people between April 2005 and April 2006, according to Atlanta Regional Commission estimates released Thursday. The city of Atlanta added 9,500 people, its largest increase in more than 30 years.

"We checked home prices to see what the tradeoffs are, and we are pretty much set to live in the city," Morgan McClure said.

The McClures moved from Virginia two years ago while Morgan, 30, finished his MBA at Emory University. They want their first house to be close to entertainment such as Turner Field and the Georgia Dome.

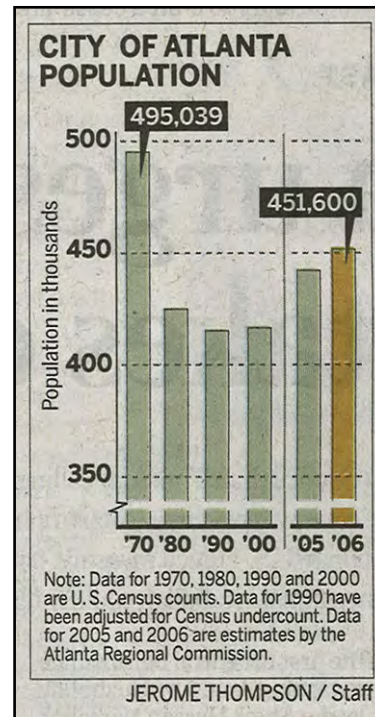
"And a lot of places in town, you still have a yard and those types of things. The tradeoff is a shorter commute. You just have a smaller house than you would in the suburbs," Morgan said.

Fueled in part by Atlanta, Fulton County added 26,100 people, edging out perennial growth leader Gwinnett County's 25,700. Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb and DeKalb counties now claim more than 650,000 residents each.

Atlanta's growth spurt is reflected in other cities like Dallas and San Diego. Many Northern cities, like Detroit and Cleveland, continue to lose population.

"The city [Atlanta] is one of the more interesting stories in this estimate, because in the 1980s, the city lost, on average, just under 1,000 people a year," said Bart Lewis, chief of ARC's research division.

The losses for Atlanta ended in the 1990s and went flat, a period when the city gained an average of about 100 residents a year. In the past four years, growth in Atlanta has gained momentum. This year, its growth outstripped suburban Clayton (6,700), Douglas (7,400), Fayette (2,200) and Rockdale (2,800) counties.



With an estimated population of 451,600, Atlanta is approaching the 495,039 residents it had in 1970. The 10-county region now has 3.93 million residents, according to the estimate.

That differs from some estimates the U.S. Census makes, which include more counties and uses different methods of analysis.

The ARC estimates growth yearly, based on housing permits issued, field surveys and 2000 census numbers.

The ARC's Lewis said the region's growth reflects a recovering economy and the attraction of affordable homes compared to some other parts of the country.

The boost may have been heightened by those who fled Hurricane Katrina last year and settled in the Atlanta region. Those numbers are hard to pin down. Some estimated that more than 40,000 people from the ravaged Gulf Coast came to Atlanta after the storm.

POPULATION OF ATLANTA REGION

Estimates are preliminary until adopted by ARC Board.

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2005	2006
Atlanta region	1,500,823	1,896,182	2,557,800	3,429,379	3,813,700	3,925,400
Cherokee	31,059	51,699	91,000	141,903	179,300	189,100
Clayton	98,126	150,357	184,100	236,517	263,900	270,600
Cobb	196,793	297,718	453,400	607,751	643,700	654,900
DeKalb	415,387	483,024	553,800	665,865	700,500	710,400
Douglas	28,659	54,573	71,700	92,174	112,900	120,300
Fayette	11,364	29,043	62,800	91,263	101,500	103,700
Fulton	605,210	589,904	670,800	816,006	874,100	900,200
Gwinnett	72,349	166,808	356,500	588,448	693,900	719,600
Henry	23,724	36,309	59,200	119,341	167,000	176,900
Rockdale	18,152	36,747	54,500	70,111	76,900	79,700

Note: Data for 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 are U. S. Census counts. Data for 1990 have been adjusted for Census undercount. Data for 2005 and 2006 are estimates by the Atlanta Regional Commission.

JEROME THOMPSON / Staff

Driving the intown boom are young couples who don't want a suburban lifestyle and empty nesters looking to dump yardwork and gain access to arts and entertainment, said Mike Wright, a managing broker for Prudential Georgia Realty.

He is working with more people from Atlanta's suburbs looking intown as well as out-of-towners.

"They are saying, 'Don't show me anything in the suburbs. I don't want to fight traffic,'" Wright said.

Young singles and couples looking for starter condos or homes used to define the market. Now, more upscale digs are being offered and snapped up by a wider age of buyers, he said.

For Daryl Buffenstein, a resident of the Reynolds condominium tower, moving onto Peachtree Street was a "chance to walk out the front door and be at any restaurant in 10 minutes," as well as be near a MARTA station for trips to the airport or the Lenox shopping district or a walk to the Fox Theatre.

"Atlanta did not offer urban living, as such to the degree as it does now, until recently," Buffenstein said.