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Feeling crowded? Million reasons why

For many, milestone is a bad dream; others are happy not to be in Phoenix

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Jessica and Jay Ebright, newcomers from Phoenix, are two of the reasons urban planners expect Pima County to hit the 1 million mark today.

While no one knows who the millionth resident will be, it's twice as likely to be someone moving here as someone born here, census numbers show.

And the Ebrights are typical transplants.

Both 35, they're a year younger than the average Tucsonan.

Their former county, Maricopa, supplies the most newcomers to Pima. Los Angeles County is second.

The Ebrights love their new hometown for many reasons, but near the top of the list is that it's not Phoenix.

They marvel that they can see the Tucson Mountains from their backyard and that nature is more a part of their daily lives.

They like the small classes — just 15 kids — in the charter school their two children attend.

But they're also happy that a new Wal-Mart Supercenter may be coming soon to their fast-growing Ajo and Kinney neighborhood so they won't have to drive so far.

And that's the paradox: By moving here, they know they're bringing the Tucson area a small step closer to becoming another Valley of the Sun.

"We did want to get out of the Valley," Jay says. "To us, it was getting too big."

If Tucson's population growth stopped right now, that would be fine with them, Jessica says.

But they also know that Pima County is many years and well over 2 million people away from becoming another Phoenix.

And with its steeper, rougher terrain and less plentiful water supply, Pima may never support a population the size of Maricopa's current 3.7 million.

Land-saving plan is hailed

Mini-doc: The effects of growth

As Tucson's population hits 1 million, Star reporter Tony Davis explores the benefits and costs of growth on the city.

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Learn more about Tucson at a million, including stories looking at how we got here and where we're headed, a mini-documentary video examining the effects of growth on the city and more videos and slide shows.

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Pima County by the numbers
752,270

vehicles registered.

10,911

Hyundais registered.

6,542

Lexuses registered.

376

ATMs.

At 1 million, Pima County still does reasonably well on some key environmental indicators.

Our air quality meets federal standards, we aren't overpumping our underground water as much as we used to, and we have a land-saving plan hailed by Time magazine as the nation's most ambitious — its goal is to save half a million acres by 2050.

Many longtime Tucsonans, however, aren't the least bit happy at reaching the million-residents landmark, even though they know the growth has meant more jobs, restaurants, shops, movie screens, theater companies and nightclubs.

While jobs are plentiful, the average Pima County worker's annual pay is about 92 percent of the national average and 85 percent of the average pay in Phoenix.

The most recent poll on the subject — done last year for the state Commerce Department — found that only 47 percent in Pima County were satisfied with how their communities are growing, compared with 68 percent in Maricopa and 55 percent statewide.

One reason for the discontent is that Pima County has far less natural desert, more traffic and a more precarious long-term water supply than when we reached a half-million people in 1978.

In 1945 we had 86 miles of paved roads. Today we have 4,300.

Today, a total of 1,270 square miles have been graded in Pima County — more than all the land in Rhode Island.

Many Sonoran Desert animals have declined as a result; 36 vulnerable species need protecting, county officials say.

Countywide, more than 47,000 homes have been built just since 2000.

Our schools are overcrowded in many areas; in the booming bedroom community of Sahuarita, one class has to meet in a hallway.

The way Tucson used to be

For Opha Probasco, who has lived here more than 80 years, there's no question that the quality of life is worse today.

"Back in 1925, everything was right Downtown. Now, I don't go Downtown unless I have to," says Probasco, who drove a truck and worked for the railroad in his younger years, and wrote a book last year about his experiences in pre-World War II Tucson.

"Now we're drinking water out of the Colorado River. Before that, we had good groundwater — the best that you would want to drink.

"And the desert — there's nothing left of the desert. It's been covered with houses and businesses."

Yet Probasco understands why the Ebrights and so many like them are drawn to Tucson, and he wouldn't live anywhere else.

"You can't stop progress," the 87-year-old retiree says.

129

payday-loan centers.

107,160

licensed dogs.

489

churches.

364

schools.

6 acres

of desert developed every day.

3.4

square miles of desert developed every year.

68,000

residents with asthma.

769

valley fever cases reported this year.

41,258

swimming pools.

244

gas stations.

20,000+

streetlights.

645

traffic lights.

347

sidewalk miles.

407,000

houses.

9,284

homes built before 1940 and still standing.

More pollution, less desert

We're hitting 1 million three years earlier than experts predicted in 1999 due to a brighter economy. That pushes our population rank to 39th in the nation.

Pima County now has more residents than seven states: Wyoming, Vermont, South Dakota, North Dakota, Delaware, Alaska and Montana.

Suburbanization is spreading rapidly in Tucson, crossing into Cochise, Pinal and Santa Cruz counties.

Although home lot sizes are shrinking, our overall population density has changed little since 1980 — about 2,500 people per square mile, compared with nearly 5,000 during the 1950s, when Tucson's urban center lay Downtown.

Today's sprawl offers more living choices, less-expensive housing and an escape from the crime and crowding of the urban core.

But it also makes people drive farther to their jobs, causes their cars to emit more pollution, and wipes out far more desert than if the growth were more clustered.

The average commutes aren't getting much longer — only a two-minute increase from 1980 to 2005. But congestion is worse, with the average Tucson driver now stuck in traffic for 29 hours a year compared with 13 hours in 1992.

Opha Probasco can still recall riding horses and horse-drawn wagons. Today, if he has a 9 a.m. doctor's appointment at East Speedway and North Wilmot, he says he must leave his home near West Ajo and South Mission Road an hour earlier.

Jessica Ebright, however, has no problems with Tucson's traffic, since it is far smoother than Phoenix's perpetual rush-hour gridlock.

"What Tucsonans complain about as a lot of traffic, it's nothing," she says.

Concern about ozone levels

Air pollution also is not as bad as in many big cities, with Tucson logging no violations of federal clean-air standards since 1999. We've only come close to violating the rules for ozone, an indicator of smog.

But that doesn't mean the air is healthy. A scientists' review panel for the Environmental Protection Agency says the United States allows too much dust, smoke and soot pollution, as well as ozone.

The panel wants the EPA to crack down on ozone, which would put Tucson "really close" to violating the rules, said Lee Comrie, air-quality planning manager for the Pima Association of Governments.

For lifelong Tucsonan Gladys Carrillo, air pollution hits home every time she gets in her car. She must keep her windows closed to avoid breathing exhaust. She has chronic obstructive lung disease, meaning the airflow from her lungs and through her body is routinely blocked. She's had to use an oxygen tank for the last six months.

"Thirty or 40 years ago, when you went into the Catalina Foothills, you could

2,600

Wal-Mart employees.

1,860

corrections employees.

36,000+

employees in growth- related industries.

31,500

environmental-group members.

17

endangered and threatened species.

23

stories in our tallest building (Unisource Tower).

8,000

miles of dirt roads.

4,300

miles of paved roads.

307,000

solo commuters.

51,000

carpoolers.

Three

freeways and parkways.

4.1 million

Yearly passengers through Tucson International Airport (Phoenix Sky Harbor has 41.2 million).

One

daily nonstop flight to New York City.

15,000

hotel rooms.

see the brown cloud hanging over Tucson," says Carrillo, a retired telephone operator and library page who lives near Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

"Now, you can see it from everywhere practically. It hangs over the city and you can see it almost every day."

For Jay Ebright, however, "You couldn't believe how clean the air is here compared to Phoenix. The brown cloud there is horrendous."

Tucson's pumping of more water from its aquifer than it replaces, probably its longest-running environmental problem, has eased slightly since it started receiving Central Arizona Project water from the Colorado River in 2001.

Per-person water use has dropped from 205 gallons a day in 1975 to 163 gallons today, giving Tucson one of the lowest rates in the arid West. But total annual use by Tucson Water customers doubled in the same period because of growth.

A stronger magnet

Crossing the 1 million population barrier can make a city a stronger magnet for big, high-paying employers — if local schools succeed in training an educated work force.

The growth can also draw more affluent, educated newcomers from large cities.

And that's important because economically, Tucson remains a stepchild compared not just with Phoenix but with the nation.

Unemployment is low in Pima County — 3.7 percent in September. The number of jobs created statewide in the past year — 119,000 — was 4.6 percent more than the year before, says Marshall Vest, director of the Office of Business and Economic Research at the University of Arizona.

The average worker's pay rose by 18.2 percent after inflation was taken into account over the past decade, to \$39,000 today.

But those rosy numbers mask deeper problems, economists say.

High-tech and other manufacturing sectors haven't fully recovered from the post-9/11 slump, Vest says.

About 25 percent of the jobs that have been created here in the past several years are in construction — which pays less than high-tech and is more vulnerable to boom-and-bust cycles. Construction accounts for about 7 percent of all Tucson-area jobs.

"That's happening because people are moving here by the droves," Vest says. "Our economy and population are growing so fast ... that it's hard to create enough good, high-tech jobs to keep up with growth."

Worse, says UA economist Marshall Worden, the income gap between the wealthiest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent of Arizona residents is the largest of any state.

Hourly wage is \$13.25

Pima County's median hourly wage stands at about \$13.25 an hour, or \$27,600 a year.

111
 movie screens.
 1,521
 restaurants.
 133
 Mexican restaurants.
 117
 pizza joints.
 146
 bars.
 1,345
 liquor licenses.
 297,482
 pounds of marijuana seized this year.
 Two
 professional sports teams (Tucson Sidewinders — baseball, Arizona Heat — softball).
 One
 concert arena.
 Five
 casinos.
 598,000
 people who speak English only.
 199,000
 people who speak Spanish at home.
 129,000
 foreign-born residents.

Rosa Lopez, a South Side machine-shop worker whose wages are close to the middle ground for Pima County, says she's doing OK, but not great.

She works at Morpac, near South Tucson Boulevard and East Bilby Road, making high-voltage switches for electric utilities.

Lopez, 47, who's worked there six years, says she's content with her \$13.75-an-hour wage, in part because "it's the best I ever had, anywhere."

The company pays all of her health-insurance premiums, although she pays \$10 to \$30 co-payments.

In her previous job, at a North Side manufacturing plant, she received \$7.35 an hour. Before that, she made about \$150 a month as a schoolteacher in a small Sonoran town.

Now divorced and the mother of two grown children, she owns a house in Midvale Park. She was able to buy the home nine years ago only because she worked about 35 hours of overtime a week in her previous job.

Today, she saves as much of her salary as possible and doesn't eat out much or indulge in a lot of entertainment.

Ebrights are thriving

In contrast with many Tucson workers, Jay and Jessica Ebright say they aren't making less than they would in Phoenix. They run a Tucson branch of a Phoenix-based business, Action Termite Control.

Their two Tucson staffers make the same amount — \$30,000 a year plus at least that much in commissions — as their Phoenix counterparts.

Overall, the Ebrights' business in Tucson is thriving.

"Right now, I don't think we're going anywhere anytime soon," Jessica says. "I feel very much at home here."

On StarNet: A mini- documentary explores the positives and negatives of Tucson's population reaching 1 million, at go.azstarnet.com/onemillion

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freeways and parkways.

4.1 million

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One

daily nonstop flight to New York City.

15,000

hotel rooms.

111

movie screens.

1,521

restaurants.

133

Mexican restaurants.

117

pizza joints.

146

bars.

1,345

liquor licenses.

297,482

pounds of marijuana seized this year.

Two

professional sports teams (Tucson Sidewinders — baseball, Arizona Heat — softball).

One

concert arena.

Five

casinos.

598,000

people who speak English only.

199,000

people who speak Spanish at home.

129,000

foreign-born residents.

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