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Census 2000

Supersizing from small town to suburb

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by [Mike Lindblom](#)
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The new census figures hold no surprises for Justin Beers, Gabe Mortensen and Ben Wulfert.

The three teenage buddies from Maple Valley already knew what the numbers now show: Their little town is caught up in a national trend in which suburbs are spawning farther-flung suburbs.

These older rural communities are being transformed by cream-colored houses and drive-through pharmacies, telltale trappings of suburban prosperity.

This ring of supersized towns orbits greater Seattle, and includes places such as Stanwood, Lake Stevens, Monroe, Sultan, Sammamish, Snoqualmie, North Bend, Maple Valley, Covington, Milton and Port Orchard.

In Southwest Washington, suburban Clark County is spilling over with new residents, leading all counties in the state with a 45 percent growth rate over the past decade.

Closer to Seattle, the new city of Sammamish, where 21,550



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Gabe Mortensen, left, Ben Wulfert, in the red sweat shirt, and Justin Beers have grown up in rural Maple Valley. The woods where they played, built forts and even did a little hunting have been cut and bulldozed for new development. Growth in the area has changed the small town into a bustling suburb.

people lived a decade ago, now has 34,104 people, a 58 percent increase.

Over the same decade, some closer-in suburbs swelled: Mill Creek grew 61 percent to 11,525 people; Bothell's northward expansion into Snohomish County fueled a 144 percent increase to 30,150; and in Kent, immigrants, annexations and new housing doubled its population to 79,524, the state's eighth-largest city.

In Kitsap County, Bremerton actually lost population, but its suburbs boomed. Port Orchard grew 54 percent to 7,693 people, while communities along Hood Canal grew by more than 25 percent. In Pierce County, the fastest-growing communities were the suburbs, including Sumner, which grew by 35 percent, and Bonney Lake, which grew 29 percent.

Beers and his two Maple Valley friends barely recognize their hometown, which jumped from 6,600 people to 14,209 people, a 115 percent increase in the past decade.

"It's turning into Kent," says an exasperated Wulfert. "Kent is going to be like Seattle."

Maple Valley, which only incorporated in 1997, is now a community where police officers and jet makers live, where a house sells for \$100,000 less than in older, upscale Eastside suburbs such as Bellevue.

"You see a lot of people commuting to Redmond, commuting to Microsoft, because it's affordable here and it's still got a hometown atmosphere," said real-estate agent Colleen Fischesser.

And quieter streets with lots of kids and thriving public schools. From back decks, the vistas are still of second-growth Douglas fir - at least until the next wave of new neighbors arrive.

Jay Flowers, an electrician, left an apartment in Renton in 1994 and bought a new three-bedroom, triple-garage Maple Valley home for \$160,000. "I knew it was gonna grow. I wanted a return on investment on my house," he said.

"It's still an ideal spot. People are a lot friendlier compared to Renton. I don't think they have the stress of the city."

But for the three teens - who themselves moved here only about seven years ago - growth has drawbacks. The police no

longer know the good kids from the bad, so they stop all young people, they say.

When class lets out at 2 p.m., the two-lane highway into town is clogged, so the boys detour down a side street where land is being scraped clean. It's a spot, Beers says, where he used to bowhunt deer.

"They're paving my back yard," he said. A log shelter the friends built a few years ago still stands, but now is within earshot of houses. Six months ago, two fawns were killed by passing cars a few days apart, and their mother hasn't been seen since.

The area, which contains some of the last tracts of undeveloped land inside King County's urban-growth boundary, will absorb another 7,000 or so people in the coming decade, city officials predict.

Once a town becomes a suburb, it's on track to become an "edge city," a phrase coined by Joel Garreau of The Washington Post in 1991. Edge cities have office towers that follow the outward migration of people, and their lifestyles no longer revolve around the central city but other suburbs.

Bellevue reached this stage in the '80s, and is often described as "too urban" by people living farther east.

Issaquah, home of the world headquarters for Costco warehouse stores, may get a 12,000-employee Microsoft campus soon, which will in turn increase the growth pressure on rural Snoqualmie Valley, even Snoqualmie Pass.

Maple Valley is trying to embrace its future. The city recently spent \$6.5 million for 50 acres of woods for a future mixed-use development.

A gravel pit will close in a decade or so, creating more room for new companies to locate, and that will help reduce a 4-to-1 imbalance between homes and jobs. The goal: allow people to work close to home, and cut down on commutes.

But strains come with growth.

Poor roads and transit service are chronic complaints along this outer ring of 'burbs, most often linked by aging two-lane highways.

When the Feb. 28 Nisqually earthquake fractured East Lake Sammamish Parkway, forcing its closure, "it was like losing

the Alaskan Way Viaduct," said Sammamish Councilman Don Gerend, referring to Seattle's north-south alternative to Interstate 5.

In nearby gridlocked Issaquah, residents argue over whether to build a bypass road across wetlands for commuters.

And young families who move out to the "country" want new schools with computers and high scholastic scores, further raising the burden on taxpayers.

Arlington needed six tries over four years to pass a school-construction bond in March 2000, while the Duvall-Carnation area has rejected a sports-field complex five times since 1994. In the late '90s, Maple Valley's Wilderness Elementary swelled to 1,200 students, a number only recently reduced through school expansions and a reassignment of students.

Water shortages and crumbling roads have forced some suburbs to temporarily stop issuing development permits - and in the case of Issaquah, the city decided to buy water from Seattle.

Density itself is a visceral issue. This month, homeowners in a Sammamish neighborhood picketed after they were surprised by new three-story condominiums built behind their homes.

For some, the solution is to move farther out. Census numbers show that yet another ring of tiny towns - Black Diamond, Gold Bar and Granite Falls among them - may form yet another new layer of suburbia.

Snohomish County, which gained 140,396 people in the past decade, ranked 26th among U.S. counties in population gain in a census survey for 1990-99.

"We're hurting," said Snohomish County Commissioner Barbara Cothorn, whose neighborhood in Thrasher's Corner has been overtaken by strip malls. "People are not happy. A lot of people in South Snohomish County moved in thinking they were in nice rural areas. Now they're not rural."

The rise of second-tier suburbs is a result of political decisions in the '90s to contain new housing inside county urban-growth boundaries. If the lines hold, decades of sprawl may finally be corralled.

"Growth is going to bounce off the edge of the ring and back into major urban centers such as Bellevue and Renton,"

predicts Chandler Felt, King County's demographer. More people will arrive, he said, but they may still find undeveloped woodlands nearby.

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