

Mat-Su population likely to grow to 100,000 by 2009

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Wasilla, Alaska - In little more than a decade, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough has more than doubled in population, from about 35,000 in 1991 to 80,000 today. It continues to be the fastest-growing community in Alaska.

Right across Cook Inlet from Anchorage, barely three miles away, is Point MacKenzie -- just part of the 24,000 square miles of the vast Mat-Su Borough. It's within sight, but truly a world away in terms of open spaces, big skies and the great outdoors.

The towns of Palmer and Wasilla are about a 40-minute drive from Anchorage. But more and more, that distance means less and less. People are moving to the area in droves.

Any construction crew can tell you houses are going up as fast as they can be built. "Oh, it's been nonstop since I've been with Spenard," says construction worker Mark Boykin.

Builders love it, and so do realtors. "Real estate has been fabulous out here," says realtor Paddy Coan. "We've had an incredible, incredible year."

Of course, growth comes at a price and what the residents of this area are struggling with is how to accommodate an increase in population while preserving all the fragile beauty.

"In the long term, it's all gonna be gone if you fill it up with people," says Wasilla resident Neil Moss.

Many dog mushers, homesteaders and hunters were drawn to the Mat-Su area years ago by the natural beauty of the borough. They worry about the growing crowds.

"The fishin' holes are gettin' more crowded, and, y'know, bird hunting isn't as good as it used to be. You gotta go further to get a moose," says Moss. "That's, y'know, why we all came to Alaska -- not to be in our neighbor's backyard. But growth is inevitable."

With growth, property values have been soaring, as have tax assessments on existing homes. "In 1991, the average sales price of a home was around the \$70,000 area," says Coan. "In 2003, I'm betting it's going to be close to \$175,000, \$180,000. "Is that a change? Absolutely. Are we paying more taxes? Yes, but we're getting more services as well, as there's a larger community."

It is a larger community, and it's still growing. According to projections, the Mat-Su Borough could add another 20,000 people in the next five years. That would mean a population of about 100,000 by 2009.

So people are worried about preserving the quality of life in the Mat-Su Valley, but they find it hard to fault others who want to move there and get that same quality of life for themselves. Many seem resigned to growth and just hope it can be managed wisely.

Certainly there are some people who are angry about the influx of new residents crowding out their "quality of life," but the folks we spoke with were either enthused about the prospect of growth, or they expressed thoughtful concerns. They hope they're smart enough to have both worlds – economic development and natural beauty.

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