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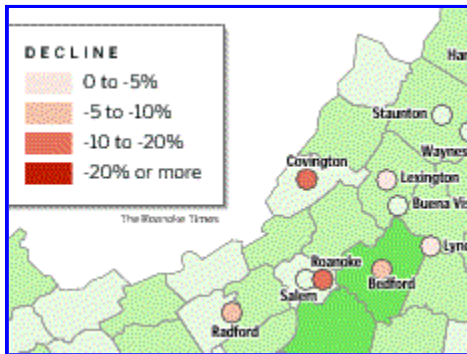
Senior citizen population swells in the Roanoke region, census shows [map]

The data come as elder advocates wrestle with how to handle the coming baby-boom age wave.

By Beth Macy and Matt Chittum
The Roanoke Times

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Map



The Roanoke Times

This map shows the percentages of growth and decline in populations older than 65 in Virginia. **Click the image to see a larger map.**



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From all those retirees who sold their New Jersey homes to move to Smith Mountain Lake to the retiring or about-to-rotate leading edge of the baby boomers, the latest 2010 U.S. census data bears out what experts have long predicted: Our already older-than-average population is growing even older.

All but four localities in the Roanoke and New River valley regions have experienced significant growth among their senior populations in the past decade. Bedford and Franklin counties saw their 65-and-over population balloon by nearly a third, making their senior populations among the fastest growing in Virginia. The median age of those counties and Botetourt County grew by more than four years, and Botetourt became the oldest county in the region with a median age of 44.9.

The trend has impact far beyond the demographer's reach. Hospitals have added geriatricians, waiting lists for needy seniors grow longer, and elder advocates wrestle with how to get a handle on the coming baby-boom age wave.

The one surprise in the plethora of census data released this week was a decline among seniors in Roanoke, where the 65-and-over population dropped by 12.5 percent since 2000. Only 20 Virginia localities lost seniors, and just seven saw greater losses than Roanoke. Seniors still make up 14.26 percent of Roanoke's population, compared with 12.2 percent statewide.

The decline in Roanoke seniors is likely fueled both by deaths and by seniors who have moved into nursing and assisted living facilities in Roanoke County and beyond, explained Jefferson College of Health Sciences sociologist Paula Prince, who said she worries about the impact on the low-income seniors left behind.

"It's going to be very difficult for this invisible group of seniors if the [state and federal] funding is not kept at current levels or increased," Prince said.

(Because the specific census data was released to the media Tuesday but embargoed until today, Prince and others interviewed commented only on trends.)

Roanoke's LOA Area Agency on Aging Executive Director Susan Williams agreed, pointing out that the agency also lost funding as a result of the 2000 census, some of which was reallocated to Northern Virginia, which has a much larger number of seniors, including a higher percentage of seniors who are low income and foreign born.

Whereas her office had 25 full-time staffers before, she's now down to just 16. The recession has hastened the hurt, she said, with the region's Meals on Wheels program growing from 600 to 700 lunches served a day in the past three years and 300 people on its waiting list for breakfast.

Williams and other leaders sound alarm bells for seniors needing in-home care or companion services as an increasing number of the very old struggle to remain in their homes. The area's only nonprofit home care agency, operated through Family Services of Roanoke Valley, has a list of 32 seniors waiting as long as two years for help. The New River Valley Area Agency on Aging, which experienced even deeper cuts as a result of the 2000 census, has a list of 55 needy people waiting for in-home care, said Executive Director Tina King.

In recession-pummeled Pulaski County, despite the loss of 255 residents, census figures showed that it picked up nearly 900 new seniors. King said the Pulaski area uses 35 percent of her agency's services. The agency serves eight localities in the New River region.

With the first of the baby boomers turning 65 this past Jan. 1, the entire region will face a far larger concentration of seniors by the time the next census rolls around. Boomers make up roughly a quarter of the population in Bedford, Franklin, Botetourt and Roanoke counties. Statewide, seniors are expected to double in number, to 1.8 million, by 2030.

A new study commissioned by the nonprofit Older Dominion Partnership, which released a preliminary report last week, showed that baby boomer Virginians aren't nearly as ready for retirement as their parents were. Among the boomers surveyed, only one-third said they feel fiscally prepared for retirement, and just 16 percent feel their communities are equipped to handle the coming age boom.

A 2009 report by the Brookings Institute notes that boomers will gray suburbs dramatically, because they are, after all, the nation's first fully "suburban generation." That means suburban communities accustomed to catering to the needs of younger populations dominated by families with children will have to adjust, the report said.

"You'd be shocked at the number of local governments that don't have a clue about this coming age wave," said the partnership's director, David Ross. "These [demographic] numbers aren't just some big what if.

"Shame on us if we don't get ready for it."

In her geriatrics social work practice, Roanoker Sandy Johnson Harris says she's noticed an increasing number of depressed caregivers, many of whom are themselves elderly. In Richmond, where she practiced before moving here in 2000, the area Agency on Aging provided greater support for in-home care, including emergency home care, and the city had a much larger offering of nonprofit, church-affiliated nursing homes.

"It's sad to say I'm just not seeing a lot of progressive movement here, and that's ridiculous considering the statistics," Harris said. "Because the baby boomers are not going to go nice and quietly into the night."

To address the graying of the region, Carilion Clinic has upped from two to six the number of certified geriatricians it has on staff in recent years. It's also in the process of empowering nurses to better coordinate care at primary care practices for senior patients who often see multiple specialists, said Dr. Aubrey Knight, section chief for geriatrics and palliative care medicine.

"The biggest hole is community-based care, especially for people who can't pay out of pocket," Knight added. "Until we as a country and we as a community can get our arms around how important home care can be and how cost-saving it can be in terms of preventing hospitalizations -- until we figure out how to fund that, we're just not going to get there."

In the affluent Smith Mountain Lake area -- where Bedford and Franklin counties experienced most of their growth prior to 2008, when the recession hit -- Carilion has built a full-scale clinic with imaging, orthopedist rotation for joint replacements and the like, a sleep clinic and a helicopter pad to help ferry critically ill patients to Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital.

"Carilion's helped a whole lot in terms of enticing people to come here," said civic leader Bob Camicia, who retired to the lake from Dallas in 2001.

"From a tax-base standpoint, the growth has been a gold mine," he added, explaining that real estate taxes from the Gills Creek and Union Hall districts bring in \$70 million annually to the county coffers.

"The real issue is to convince local governments and the population in general that old people are a resource, especially if we can figure out innovative ways to mix the generations," said retired University of Virginia professor Dr. Richard Lindsay, the geriatrician who helped design the Older Dominion Partnership survey, the results of which will be disseminated among the agencies on aging for planning purposes.

"The only big natural resource not disappearing from our landscape right now is seniors," Lindsay said.

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