

**Atlanta
Forward**
**ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC
TRENDS SHAPING OUR REGION**

Graying of metro Atlanta reshapes services, housing

Rise of older residents may strain tax base, agencies' services.

Aging population seeks 'active' communities.

By Michael E. Kanell
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Second in an occasional series.
 On a warm autumn morning at Windsong at Seven Hills, an "adult active" subdivision for seniors in Dallas, Chuck and Joanne Matt sat in a roomy living room. Out the front door, it looked like many a suburban tract. Out the back window, a bird lighted on the branches of a small tree.

They came from Chicago, where they originally retired eight years ago. Chuck, 70, had been a building and zoning officer. Joanne, 68, had been a product planner and trainer for Siemens. But they got tired of going back and forth to Atlanta to visit children and grandkids, so they migrated south.

Seniors continued on A16



Joanne Matt talks to her husband, Chuck, as he watches their cat in their living room in Windsong at Seven Hills in Dallas. The Matts are part of metro Atlanta's changing demographics.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Our reporters are dedicated to bringing you the latest news about the economic and demographic trends shaping metro Atlanta. Today, reporter Michael E. Kanell reveals how the surge of older Americans is transforming neighborhoods and challenging local governments to provide services.

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Part one of this series on new immigrants to Atlanta is available to digital AJC subscribers, including subscribers to the newspaper. Learn more about digital products at www.ajc.com/products.



"We are staying," Joanne said. "We love it. This is it."

The Matts are on the leading edge of a sizable demographic shift in metro Atlanta: the graying of the region.

The pool of people 65 and older here has already swelled to nearly a half-million – a 45 percent surge between 2000 and 2010, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission.

Many have moved to the area from other places, but most of those people were already here: baby boomers who are "aging in place." Overall, the number of 65-plus residents will double by 2025, the ARC projects.

"This is really the first time in our history as a species that we have to deal with an aging population," said James J. Bulot, director of the Georgia Department of Human Services, who was trained as a gerontologist.

By the time it crests, the rising tide of seniors will strain, stretch and likely reshape housing, transportation and government, said Alan Essig, executive director of the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, a research group.

The signs of how metro Atlanta is changing are dotted around the region:

- Thousands of housing units have been built and marketed to older residents. Most are products of private developers, but public agencies are getting in the game, too.
- Transit options like senior buses have been added in some areas.
- Pressure has grown on senior centers and local agencies to provide more "meals on wheels" and

other services to more people.

Less visible is the impact seniors are having on the region's tax base. Many counties offer reduced rates – sometimes all the way to zero – for older residents, weakening the overall tax base for government and education revenue.

"We are going to be a very different state in 20 years," said Essig. "It raises serious policy questions that are only going to get much worse."

Georgia a 'rising star'

The flood of retirees has been visible on the horizon since the baby boom, the 78 million people born between 1946 and 1964. The oldest of the boomers have now reached retirement age.

"We are at the front end of the wave," said Chris Rodde, CEO of SeniorHomes.com, a Seattle website that helps seniors search for housing. "Over the next 10 to

15 years, there is going to be a flood of this."

The ranks of Atlanta's seniors will bulge because the region is attractive to people who want to stay and increasingly to those who want to move, too, said Mary Lu Abbott, editor of Where to Retire magazine.

"In the last decade or so, Georgia has been a rising star," she said.

When it comes to picking a place to retire, most retirees consider costs and taxes – and metro Atlanta doesn't do badly on those scores, Abbott said.

The largest concentration of older residents is in Fulton County, where senior numbers are up 21 percent, to more than

83,000.

Cobb County saw the share of seniors hold steady for decades. Then, in the last 10 years, the proportion of residents 65 and older rose from 6.9 percent to 9.1 percent, said Dana Johnson, planning division manager.

"That is a substantial jump – that is not just a blip," he said.

By the most recent census, Cobb's senior population had risen to about 60,000 – third-highest in metro Atlanta, just behind DeKalb, according to the ARC.

In Gwinnett County, too, the number of elderly has climbed, said Bryan Lackey, director of planning and development.

Most dramatic is the rise in 55- to 64- year-olds, people who don't need help yet – but who soon will, he said. "That (demographic) has increased even more than we thought it would."

What does a graying population mean for the economy?

"Growth is from people, people with spending power," said Rajeev Dhanwan, director of the Economic Forecasting Center at Georgia State University. "And retirees typically come in with assets."

Still, these will be, for the most part, people on fixed incomes who are not working, he said. "It will change the dynamics."

An abundance of retirees means more apartments and condos, less money for schools. But it also means a healthy flow of spending by the more well-heeled retirees at upscale retailers and restaurants – many with an "early bird special."

Needed services

Many of the new retirees will have ample savings and will need little support. They bring one set of changes. But the poor bring another.

About 12 percent, 60,000, of Georgia's seniors live in poverty. Three times as many are "low income," with family income less than twice the poverty level, according to AARP. If that pattern and current projections hold, by 2030 the state will have more than 150,000 poor and 450,000 low-income seniors.

In metro Atlanta, one in 10 seniors is poor, according to the Census Bureau. For them, help from local government and charities will be essential.

Transportation will be crucial for people too old, disabled or poor to be drivers. Yet tens of thousands of seniors around the region have few options – especially if they are in the suburbs or otherwise not on a MARTA line.

Ben Albury, a retired grocery store manager, represents some of the challenge. The 74-year-old was living alone in an apartment in Duluth. The rent was \$500 a month, nearly half the Social Security check that was his only income.

Early in the fall, he fell in the carport of his apartment, scratching his arms as he crawled inside.

"I'm getting more feeble," Albury said. "Since then, I've had a bad fall in the living room and another in the bathroom. I worry that something is going to break."

Albury can no longer drive. He sometimes rode his electric cart about a half mile up Bu-

ford Highway to the store for provisions, which he concedes was dangerous. So he was glad to receive food from Gwinnett Senior Services.

He was glad, too, when he moved late this fall into Ashton Senior Living in Lawrenceville. Ashton is one of the three senior centers operated by Gwinnett Senior Services, which delivers 350 to 400 meals a day, said Jamie Cramer, the county's senior services manager. There is a sizable waiting list, she said.

Senior tax breaks

As more seniors move here, there is a catch. The tax breaks that entice them also result in less revenue for the services they require.

Georgia provides many tax exemptions – two apply just to seniors. One

fiscal year, according to the Department of Audits and Accounts.

There's also an exemption on retirement income that's worth \$700 million a year.

In addition, many local communities also ease the property tax burden on older homeowners, sometimes to lure seniors, sometimes just to keep from burdening long-time, low-income residents – or chasing them away.

The city of Decatur offers tax exemptions, deferrals and flexible payment plans to seniors, depending on age and – in most cases – income.

"Taxes can be a challenge (for seniors)," said Andrea Arnold, assistant city manager.

This fiscal year, the city is forgoing about \$250,000 in taxes that might have been owed by property owners who are 65 and older, Arnold said. "But is Decatur a city that can afford the home exemptions? Absolutely."

Like many other counties, Gwinnett offers exemptions to senior tax-

payors – up to a 100 percent break on property taxes for owners 65 and older. The tax rules ease the burden on older residents. They also limit the revenues available to pay for senior services.

To save money, local officials encourage donations and volunteer help, said Cramer, the senior services manager. At the senior center, the crew preparing lunches in the kitchen typically includes inmates on work detail assignment from the county Department of Corrections, she said. "That reduces our overall administrative cost for

THE GRAYING OF METRO ATLANTA

Older residents will represent a larger segment of the population in the future.

Year /Number of people 65 and over in metro Atlanta/Percent of total population:

2005	384,991	7.8%
2010	487,723	8.9%
2015	648,843	10.9%
2020	825,854	12.8%
2025	1,032,955	14.9%
2030	1,251,492	17.0%
2035	1,441,500	18.4%
2040	1,610,823	19.5%

Source: Atlanta Regional Commission

excludes income from Social Security in calculating state income tax. That is costing the state – and saving seniors – \$124 million during the current

meals.”

Housing built and marketed to seniors

The influx of seniors to metro Atlanta is having an immediate impact on housing.

Cobb has traditionally been a place for single-family homes. But more seniors means demand for condos, apartments, assisted living and personal care homes, which fall between a boarding house and an assisted living facility.

So Cobb has made a series of changes to its zoning regulations that are aimed at letting developers build different kinds of housing, Johnson said.

In July, the Marietta Housing Authority opened a 105-unit project for older residents in Acworth. By mid-September, 100 units were leased and 71 occupied, said Ray Buday, the agency's executive director. “That is extremely fast.”

So fast that the authority is thinking about building another senior project,

he said. “The fact is, there is a significant demand.”

Gwinnett has also created a series of zoning designations to meet the expectations of seniors, said Lackey. The idea is to give developers more options – like “mixed-use” projects with walkable districts or “in-law suites” and “granny pods.”

By year's end, Gwinnett may have a series of zoning revisions that could be put into use in 2013, he said.

Private developers are providing most of the new, senior-centric housing. Since 2006, 1,628 homes have been sold in “age-restricted” communities with a large master plan, said Steve Palm, president of Marietta-based housing market research firm SmartNumbers. In that time, smaller projects aimed at older residents have sold 1,808 units.

Pulte Homes, for instance, has three large projects around Atlanta under the Del Webb brand, located in Greens-

boro, Griffin and Hoschton.

Marietta-based Walton Communities has nine developments, some restricted by age, some by income. All but one are around Atlanta, said Tom Wilkes, a principal.

Among other amenities, the communities offer “lifestyle coordinators” who organize activities and trips.

Woodstock-based Windsong Properties was founded to build homes for the “adult active” market, said partner Steve Romeyn. One of the company's three projects is Windsong Seven Hills, where Chuck and Joanne Matt bought a home.

Windsong homes are close together, but separate. The project is for active retirees who drive, play tennis, swim and like knowing their neighbors.

Grela Viera, 62, moved to Windsong from nearby Kennesaw.

“I have been here for a year and a half and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else,” she said.