

MILLION

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federal or state governments, says Collier County Manager Jim Mudd.

In a marriage of geography and history — the history of ranching, farming and fishing, of north-south highways and north-to-south immigrants, of similar development ambitions and increasingly insistent preservation needs — residents of the two counties are about to commit a paradox, if the experts are right. They'll grow closer, while coincidentally becoming less familiar.

"I think we're going to have more north-south interconnects, and a lot more sharing of regional resources such as water and transportation," Mr. Mudd predicts, describing a period 20 to 25 years in the future, and citing several major road projects now in the planning stages.

"We'll have to have some kind of mass transit — maybe a bus system that interconnects the counties so you can travel between them and not be impeded."

Or a rail system, since rail — a 19th century answer to a 21st century problem — is still the most energy-efficient method of moving huge quantities of goods or people on the ground, says Wayne Daltry, a regional planner and executive director of Lee County's Smart Growth.

Nevertheless, adds Mr. Daltry, "We may be past the age of familiarity. With congestion, we may become a bit more insular again, like we were in the 1950s, when nobody cared."

"Reaching the million mark underscores the need — and I sound like an urban survivalist here — for sustainability, for versatility, to raise our own goods, and to rely more on town centers."

In other words, to work, shop and recreate, and even to raise food as much as possible, without driving a great distance to do it.

"We can fit another million, of course, but we shouldn't use any more land to do it," Mr. Daltry adds. "We need to do it in a way that builds more civic culture, more a sense of community. A large percent of the population will be newcomers, and we need to move them into more town centers, so we keep the periphery."

And then, he adds, "If most of your conveniences are met fairly close, going away will become less likely. Your social circle will become closer. So with the bigger urban area, you rediscover the small-town mentality."

That's the paradox, and it might take going up, not out, says Mr. Mudd's counterpart in Lee, County Manager Don Stilwell.

"There's a reason we have a million people now," Mr. Stilwell insists. "It's the desire-ability and the buy-ability. If we forget the reason a million people are here and don't take that into account — if we don't protect desire-ability and buy-ability — then we will have failed."

"So our challenge is to make sure we quit the sprawl. If we have more growth, and we will, we're going to need more vertical space, not horizontal. Land prices even dictate that. So that factor, and the reality of not having the ability to purchase large tracts of land anymore, helps us choose a new direction."

"We just have to really be careful how we do it."

Preservation is key

With the advent of a million residents between Fort Myers and Naples (and the number climbs to about 1.21 million when Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties are added), the figures cited as maximum sustainable population levels become suddenly more visible, and perhaps more worrisome to many, including those who stand to make money from new arrivals.

In Collier, for example, "build-out" — the term coined by planners and developers to describe a location with no more room at the inn — is about 1.07 million. In Lee that figure runs up to about 1.8 million.

That's decades away, perhaps, and it still doesn't come anywhere close to the figure of more than 5.5 million residents today in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale urban core alone, which covers roughly the same distance as the Naples-Fort Myers urban core.

But it still seems like a great number to many, even to those who stand to make money as the population increases.

Jim Green, a Lee County Realtor, explains that he's not so much concerned about this million as he is about the next million people.

"Build-out per the Lee County Comprehensive Plan, with no changes, accommodates about 1 million new residents in Lee alone," he says. "While this seems a bit over the top in itself, developers continue to barrage the county to add additional density beyond the comprehensive plan."

"I believe the time has come to regroup, consider lower population projections as a goal, and to get creative with redevelopment and infill initiatives."

Many now agree. And no matter what happens, nearly everybody insists that preservation, especially of green and open space, is a key for everyone.

"When I was a kid (in the mid-1950s) there were 40,000 people here, and now I consider the place ruined," says Hank Hendry, a downtown Fort Myers lawyer whose family of cattle ranchers dates back generations (Hendry County is named for his great-great-grandfather, F.A. Hendry).

"What can you do? I just don't know. It's kind of dismal. We can't go back to what we had. So I guess it's a question of how to preserve as much green space as we can. I was telling somebody the other day, maybe we ought to change the federal flood insurance rule. We should use the insurance only to buy new property (and preserve it), instead of letting people rebuild."

Preservation of green space must have a pragmatic end, not only an aesthetic one, if we aim to sustain ourselves at least in part, argues Mr. Daltry, the planner.

"I don't want to see Immokalee cease to produce food," he says. "I'd like the range lands to still have cattle to the extent that they can, and I'd like to see the fishery fishable and sustainable again."

In human terms

Meanwhile, not only the engineering and development challenges but the social challenges are significant — in health and education alone, for example.

Many Collier County workers commute from Lee County. And about 1.25 percent of the new arrivals to Lee two years ago — people who established themselves as permanent residents — came from Collier County, according to Census figures.

"We might have someone who lives

THE CLIMB TO THE MILLION MARK

There we were — do you remember? It was 1958, and Dwight D. Eisenhower was in the White House.

Here in the Sunshine State, LeRoy Collins was governor, the first prominent leader to actively support integration.

As October unfolded, the New York Yankees met the Milwaukee Braves in the World Series, and many of the state's 4.4 million residents — a million fewer people than now live between Miami and Fort Lauderdale alone — listened on radios as the Yankees, underdogs, went on to win the series behind Mickey Mantle's bat and Whitey Ford's pitching.



Burdie and Pansy.

COURTESY PHOTO

In Lee and Collier Counties, boys like Hank Hendry or Bruce Strayhorn, now Fort Myers lawyers in their 50s, could ride where they wished on horseback unimpeded by fences, or take their .22 rifles or shotguns and hunt rabbits or turkeys or deer outside of town whenever they wished.

"The only way to get to Naples from Fort Myers was on a little two-lane road, and it took an hour," said Hank Hendry, fondly recalling hunting or horseback trips in places that now contain international airports and thousands of homes. "Now it still takes an hour."

In Naples, or east of town in Copeland, girls like Pansy Baker were not allowed to drink at the same water fountains (not that there were any in Copeland), or enter and sit in the same restaurants, or go to the same schools as white children.

And north of there in east Lee County, her someday husband, Burdie Baker, moved into Charleston Park off Route 80 and discovered it was no different than the Georgia from which he helped his mother and sisters "escape" from a farm where they sharecropped, in the middle of the night.

If he wanted a beer at a little road house nearby, he recalled, he had to go to the side and buy it through the window, then stand outside drinking under the stars.

"Can you tell me why they hated us so much — I have never been able to understand," his wife said recently, posing a question that seemed one of curiosity, not bitterness.

In 1958, air conditioning and mosquito control in any contemporary sense were absent from the landscape of nearly everyone, rich or poor, white or black. They would begin appearing in the next year or two.

Naples, as a town, included about 5,000 people, with another 1,000 or 1,500 living in the county. And Fort Myers might have

numbered about 40,000, with about 10,000 more living in the county.

That year, according to *Florida Trend Magazine*, the state sales tax was 3 percent. Now it's six percent, the lowest in the state since Lee and Collier are two of only seven among Florida's 67 counties that do not add a "local option surcharge" ranging from .5 percent to 1.5 percent.

Some people had telephones, and any number of them, about 68 percent, could get to a phone, though not necessarily one wired into their home. (Nowadays, 97 percent of all Florida residents have home telephones and 84 percent own a cell phone.)

Gasoline was 25 cents a gallon, rent averaged about

\$71 per month, and the per capita income for Floridians in 1958 was a whopping \$1,728, with the medium income for a family of four running at \$4,722.

Now, in a state with almost 18.5 million residents, rent averages \$641, per capita income is \$38,444, and median income for a family of four is just over \$65,000.

Nowadays, schools, housing and businesses are integrated; black, white, brown, red and yellow, if you wish to define race by color, live and work together; and the growing pains have sometimes been extraordinarily painful.

In Collier County now, according to a Web site, *city-data.com*, U.S. born residents in 2006 included almost 62,000 from the Northeast and 59,500 from the Midwest. About 48,800 came from Florida, and another 25,000 from the South, with 5,800 or so arriving from the West.

In Lee, meanwhile, almost 114,000 came from the Northeast, with 118,000 from the Midwest, 51,000 from the South and about 10,000 from the West.

In all those years since 1958, the counties grew, and sometimes they grew by leaps and bounds. In 1983, what is now Southwest Florida International Airport began operating; just the year before, I-75 south of Tampa had been completed, paving the way for a significant increase in visitors and residents.

Also in 1992 — and perhaps just as appealing to those who wanted permanent sunshine — Lee County's property appraiser, Ken Wilkinson, designed and helped implement the state's Save Our Homes Amendment that held down any increase in property tax on the homes of permanent residents to no more than 3 percent per year.

All of it made a difference, including the unhappy facts.

In 1975 in Collier County, more than five people per hundred thousand would die in car accidents; in Lee that year the figure was seven fatalities per hundred thousand.

Now in Collier, about 18 died per hundred thousand people two years ago, and in Lee the figure was running about 25 per hundred thousand.

Meanwhile, Collier fatalities caused by drunken drivers rode a bell curve from 1 (per hundred thousand people) in 1975 to 13 in 1987 and back to about 3 per hundred thousand in 2006. In Lee, a similar curve showed a rise from 1 to 11 deaths between 1975 and 2005, then dropped to about less than 7 in 2006.

This year, fortunately (according to many in Collier and Lee counties), the Yankees will not appear in the World Series — although they might have. They're still out there, though, must like they were in 1958.

And so are people like Hank Hendry, Bruce Strayhorn and Pansy and Burdie Baker, who appear to have accepted both growth and the old and new neighbors alike, whatever their color or backgrounds, with grace and equanimity.

"Being assimilated into one big homogeneous family usually comes with aches and pains," said Mr. Strayhorn. "We're not always proud of our families, but we're all in this community together."

in Lehigh Acres but they work in Immokalee, and at their workplace it's determined they have an infectious disease, so we get notified," explains Deb Millsap, a spokeswoman for the

Collier County Health Department. "They actually live in Lee, so that's the county that will follow the disease, but we will work together."

"As our population grows and our