SITE SELECTION MAGAZINE

10 Fastest-Growing Small Metros in America with the Highest Migration Rate

1. The Villages, Florida
2. Jefferson, Georgia
3. Punta Gorda, Florida
4. Homosassa Springs, Florida
5. Sandpoint, Idaho
6. Pahrump, Nevada
7. Granbury, Texas
8. St. George, Utah
9. Prineville, Oregon
10. Sebring-Avon Park, Florida

A waterfront lifestyle is the norm in Punta Gorda and surrounding Charlotte County, located on the Gulf Coast of southwest Florida.
Photos courtesy of Charlotte County FL Economic Development

Punta Gorda: The Next Florida Boomtown

Southwest Florida is no stranger to boomtowns. From Cape Coral to North Port, this Gulf Coast region has seen its share of up-and-coming cities over the past two decades. But get ready for one more: Punta Gorda.

Located in the heart of Charlotte County, about 30 minutes north of Fort Myers and 45 minutes south of Sarasota, Punta Gorda is a small town itching to bust out.

According to data from University of Virginia demographic researcher Hamilton Lombard, Punta Gorda is the third-fastest-growing small metro for in-migration in the country since 2020, averaging growth of 4.2% annually in new movers. Since 2020, more than 32,000 new residents

have moved to this small metro area, pushing the county's total population figure to nearly 210,000 in 2024. The City of Punta Gorda has 21,690 residents today.

"In commercial and industrial terms, we are making the map," says Dave Gammon, economic development director for the county. "Punta Gorda is a vacation hotspot with charming old houses and a traditional downtown. Punta Gorda Isles has canals. Everyone has boats to get out to Charlotte Harbor, the second largest estuary in Florida."

The spring training home of the Tampa Bay Rays, Punta Gorda is building a future where its primary opportunity for economic growth rests with five interchanges on Interstate 75 (only one of which is built out) and Punta Gorda Airport Park. As of spring 2024, eight businesses had new facility space under construction in the park. Together, these expansion projects will add 1,000 jobs to the county.

"Airport Park is starting to explode with manufacturing businesses," says Gammon. "This is a good location for distribution which can serve Naples, Tampa and Okeechobee. We have available sites in the park, ranging from one to 100 acres. It is a simple on and off I-75 and right off U.S. Highway 17, which takes you to Orlando."

New residents who can't find a home to buy in quaint downtown Punta Gorda can choose from a variety of national builders in Babcock Ranch, a massive solar-powered community that already has 9,000 residents and is pushing toward 50,000.

"They come to our Board of County Commissioners every month with a proposal for a new expansion," says Gammon. "We are literally watching a new town form overnight in the middle of the state."

The same could be said of Punta Gorda's transformation. Charlotte County may now have the second oldest demographic in the country, but with the current wave of new movers, that is about to change.

From Site Selection magazine, July 2024

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Go Small or Go Home

The pandemic changed site selection patterns for companies and their workers.

Remote work from rural America.

Photo: Getty Images

by Ron Starner

Pedro Morgado knew what he was doing when he traded in the fast-paced urban lifestyle of Miami and Tampa for the quiet comforts of Harlan County, Kentucky.

A remote information technology worker, Morgado says he was seeking “a small community where I can be around the woods, raise a family and enjoy a good life.”

Tucked into the southeastern corner of Kentucky directly across the state line from Virginia, Harlan County is still experiencing a period of economic transition. Having relied on coal mining for over a century, Harlan is shifting slowly toward a smaller mix of commercial, retail and remote jobs.

That suits Morgado just fine. “I grew up in a small town in Venezuela,” he says. “I love big cities, but they are crowded. I wanted to have a farm of my own. I saw this house online and bought it.”

Morgado is one of a rapidly growing number of Americans taking advantage of relocation incentives to move across country and start a new life. Places like Harlan; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Lincoln, Kansas, are growing the ranks of their highly skilled, highly educated talent pools by enticing workers to move with handsome relocation stipends ranging from $5,000 to $10,000 or more for qualifying applicants.

In many ways, Morgado is the ideal candidate. “I work remotely 100% of the time,” he says. “My company is based in Arkansas, but I wanted to be in a place where I could develop myself. Moving to Harlan was a big change. I don’t have to spend 30 minutes driving to the grocery store anymore. There is no traffic here, and I love the people. It is really nice.”

If he wants to visit a big city, he can drive to Lexington, Kentucky, or Knoxville, Tennessee. Each is about two and a half hours away. But he doesn’t plan on moving again. “I plan on staying in Harlan,” he says. “I want to help my community, and I want to help them bring more jobs here.”

So far, more than 2,000 people have expressed interest in moving to the Appalachian hills of Eastern Kentucky, according to the organization MakeMyMove, a clearinghouse of data on relocation incentive programs for workers wanting a fresh start in a new town. Cheryl Reed, spokesperson for MakeMyMove, says, “Most news coverage about programs that pay remote workers to relocate focus on the incentives. But that’s not really what’s motivating the mass migration — including hundreds of people moving from major cities to small towns and country sides across the U.S. And it’s not what will compel them to stay.”

Relationships Are the Real Incentives

“The money is just the hook,” says Kelly Gourley, executive director of the Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation in Kansas. “It’s what comes after that makes someone feel good about the move.”

Ayenna Gomez concurs. She recently took advantage of a local incentive offer and relocated from Atlanta to Lincoln County. “I had always lived in a major city,” she says. “I lived in

Philadelphia for the first 18 years of my life and then Atlanta for the next 30. I got tired of all the hustle and bustle and crime. I heard a commercial about a program that pays you to move. I applied and got approved in two days."

She hasn't looked back since. "When I visited Lincoln, everyone was welcoming," she says. "I immediately met someone who invited me to attend a yoga class with other ladies. Everyone was friendly. From that point on, I knew I had found my new home."

An accountant who had worked for a property management company for 10 years, Gomez says her employer became a 100% remote working firm during the pandemic. "After two years, they wanted us to come back to the office. I knew I could not do that," she says. "I quit my job and then found another job that was fully remote."

Gomez says she received a $5,000 stipend for moving expenses, along with a one-year gym membership, $500 toward high-speed internet service, and the gift of a free dozen eggs per week for her first year in Lincoln.

"It has been a fantastic experience," she notes. "It was an easy process once I went online and found a county for which I could apply. They reached out to me and followed through every step of the way. They were very resourceful."

Gomez is not alone. Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, millions of Americans have moved. In the majority of cases, these workers and their families chose not to relocate to major cities. Rather, they selected small towns, rural counties and otherwise remote places to live.

Source: Hamilton Lombard, University of Virginia Demographic Researcher

2020: The Demographic Turning Point

Hamilton Lombard, demographic researcher at the University of Virginia, quantified this exodus of Americans from big cities to small towns. In a report he wrote for the UVA Demographic Research Group and the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, he noted that "as remote work persists, rural America saw a continued migration surge in 2023."

Here is his key finding: "Migration out of counties with more than 1 million residents in 2023 remained nearly twice as high as before the pandemic, while migration into the country's smallest metro areas and rural counties rose in 2023 from already near-record levels in 2022. The Census Bureau's 2023 population estimates show that instead of being an anomaly, 2020 increasingly appears to have been a demographic turning point for much of the country."

The fastest-growing small metros (under 250,000 people) due to migration since 2020, according to UVA and Census data, were The Villages, Florida; Jefferson, Georgia; Punta Gorda, Florida; Homosassa Springs, Florida; and Sandpoint, Idaho. The places that registered

the highest change in migration rates were Panama City, Florida; Jefferson, Georgia; Hinesville, Georgia; Clewiston, Florida; and The Villages.

It's not just people that are seeking small towns. Many corporate investors are too. SK Battery chose Jefferson in northeast Georgia for a billion-dollar battery plant project.

"Jefferson has attracted close to 3,700 more people than it has lost from other parts of the country annually since 2020, giving it an annual migration rate of just under 5% of its population," says Lombard. "From a workforce perspective, the working-age population shrunk in most of the U.S. during the 2010s, but with the change in migration trends in recent years, we are seeing the working-age population grow in more rural counties and tertiary metro areas."

Rural working-age population growth due to in-migration is especially strong in places that run along the Appalachian Mountain chain in the South, from northern Georgia through the Carolinas, eastern Tennessee and western Virginia. If you were to drive from Rome, Georgia, to Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia, you would drive through the heart of this fast-growing rural mecca.

This migration wave is especially prominent among highly educated technical workers. "Tech talent is going everywhere now," says Lombard. "It's hard to know where all the tech workers are living today, but we can spot the growth areas moving forward. They are places that offer a good balance of affordable housing and high quality of life. They are the rural small towns that will grow the most."

Cases in point, he says, include northern Maine, northern Michigan and southern Appalachia. "Look at the growth of people moving into southern Appalachia," he adds. "They have seen some of the highest rates of migration in recent years. My advice to corporate site selectors is this: We are getting to the point where there is no growth occurring in the workforce. That means one thing: Migration matters more now. Population changes matter. Pay attention to them."

SOURCE

https://siteselection.com/issues/2024/jul/rural-advantage-go-small-or-go-home.cfm