

How will the USA cope with unprecedented growth?

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

CHARLOTTE — The fact the USA is growing faster than any other industrialized country in the world comes as no surprise to Tim Gibbs.

Born and raised here, he lives on the far edge of North Carolina's most populous metropolitan area and works 30 miles north in downtown Charlotte. Development spilling out of the booming city and Mecklenburg County is creeping closer and clogging his commute. If he leaves after 6:15 a.m. or before 8 a.m., he's on the road for up to 90 minutes.

"It's just overwhelming," says Gibbs, 46. "Folks who were born here try to figure out where is everybody coming from. ... Growth is out of control."

He hasn't seen anything yet. The USA added 100 million people in the past 39 years and last week topped 300 million. We'll add the next 100 million even faster. Sometime around 2040, according to government estimates, the population clock will tick past 400 million.

"Mind-boggling," says Gibbs, a transportation planner for the city. "There is a finite amount of land available."

Can the USA, which trails only China and India in population, absorb another 100 million people in such a short time? Where will everybody live? Space itself isn't the issue. More than half of Americans live within 50 miles of the Atlantic, Pacific, Gulf and Great Lakes coasts on just a fifth of the country's land area, according to the Center for Environment and Population, a non-profit research and policy group based in New Canaan, Conn.

But people can't live on land alone, especially if they want water in the desert, plentiful fuel to power long commutes, energy to cool and heat bigger houses and clean air and water. How and where they live could determine how well the nation — and the environment — will handle the added population.

"People who work on smart growth development issues say there's no way we can continue over the next 40-odd years without severe consequences to the environment," says Victoria Markham, director of the center. "That presents some really good opportunities for changing the ways we adapt to this growth. ... If population is going to grow, which it will, we have to find different ways to reside on that land."

Each American today occupies almost 20% more developed land (housing, schools, stores, roads) than 20 years ago, according to Markham's group. By the late 1990s, 1.7 acres — the equivalent of about 220 parking spaces or 16 basketball courts — were developed for every person added to the population.

"We're going in the wrong direction right now," says Don Chen, executive director of Smart Growth America, a coalition of groups working to slow sprawl. "The rate of land consumption is twice the rate of population growth."

There are signs that Americans are rethinking their ways. The major growth patterns of the past 50 years — sprawl, the shrinking of old industrial centers in the Midwest and Northeast and the boom in the Sun Belt — are being challenged by changing demographics.

Americans are aging but they're healthier and living longer. It's making them reconsider traditional retirement paths. More are eyeing downtown condos near entertainment centers or college towns where they can be close to the arts, culture, education and medical expertise. Households are smaller, making McMansions less attractive and condos and townhouses more appealing.

Gas costs more and traffic congestion is worsening, making long commutes hard on the wallet and the psyche. More immigrants are arriving, increasing mass transit ridership and carpooling in a country where driving alone still dominates.

"Where are they going to live? Probably in the major metropolitan areas," says Arthur C. Nelson, co-director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech in Alexandria, Va. "It brings us a lot of opportunities but also a lot of challenges."

The next 100 million people will create 73 million new jobs, about 70 million new homes and 100 billion square feet of non-residential space, according to his research.

Changing face of development

Indications are growing that the automobile-dependent suburban lifestyle of the 1950s — tract homes built on streets and cul-de-sacs increasingly distant from central cities — is losing traction.

Urban town centers that combine condos, shops and offices in pedestrian-friendly settings are sprouting in suburbia. Residential construction in downtown districts is on the rise because empty-nesters and young professionals want to be where the action is. Areas that have scant histories of mass transit, such as Phoenix and Dallas, are investing billions in light-rail lines. Cities not known for impressive skylines, including Charlotte, are building high-rises.

"There's been a real change in the American consumer looking at how they live," says Anthony Flint, author of *This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America*. "We've been spreading ourselves out generously and thinly across the land because we could. Energy was cheap. It made sense to satisfy our longing for elbow room, wide open spaces, a sense of security and ... affordability."

Now, the cost benefits of buying a house 45 miles from work often are offset by prices at the pump.

"It takes more money to heat and cool a big house," says Flint, public affairs manager at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a think tank in Cambridge, Mass. "Once you factor in the true cost of that housing by including transportation and energy costs, yes, Americans will get very resourceful very fast and change how they live."

There also is increased awareness that how we live affects the environment and our health. *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's documentary about global warming, did well at the box office this summer. Concern over obesity is prompting community design that encourages more walking to stores and schools.

"Growth issues are manifesting themselves in our everyday lives" in traffic congestion, loss of open space and more water and air pollution, Markham says.

Among the ways the nation can absorb the next 100 million:

- Brownfields. Industrial sites along river banks, abandoned warehouses near train depots and gas stations on street corners are becoming prized properties because they are rare patches of buildable land in urban areas. Developers are cleaning up land contaminated by hazardous materials and building housing — from affordable apartments in Portland, Ore., to luxury condos on Philadelphia's Main Line.

More than 50,000 brownfield sites have been converted to new uses in the past decade, according to the Northeast–Midwest Institute, a non–partisan research organization based in Washington, D.C.

When Denver's Stapleton International Airport closed in 1995, it gave a city with little room to grow a chance to add thousands of homes. More than 1,000 acres were set aside for parks and open space. About 2,500 houses and more than 300 apartments already have been built on the 3,000 acres that are being developed. Expected when the project is done in about 15 years: 8,000 houses, 4,000 apartments, four schools and 2 million square feet of retail. Up to 30,000 people could live there.

- Infill. Every abandoned strip mall, boarded–up row house or underused parking lot is a potential house or condo or apartment.

"Most of the new development needs can be accommodated on existing parking lots, dead and dying strip malls and shopping centers, older office parks and older industrial parks," Nelson says. "They are very low–density now but in most cases, they're one large area under one ownership and already on a four–plus lane highway."

Developers have turned these "grayfields" into mixed–used centers. Malls outside Denver and Orlando and office parks in San Jose and Atlanta now are town centers that combine residential units and office space, stores, theaters and restaurants. "I don't think we've seen anything yet," Nelson says.

- Going vertical. Building up instead of out can accommodate more people on less land.

"As the population grows, there is increasing demand for high-rise construction," says David Scott, chairman of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, based in Chicago.

It's happening even in suburbs and smaller cities on the edge of major metropolitan centers. "You see 20 or 30 stories in Stamford, Conn., which you would not have seen 20 years ago," Scott says.

- Rail lines and transit villages. Cities that had let public transit wither are revitalizing it and encouraging development around transit stops. Metro areas better known for sprawl are hopping aboard the rail mania, including Dallas, Albuquerque, Houston, Minneapolis, Phoenix and Charlotte.

Twenty-seven metropolitan areas have transit systems, and 15 are planning new ones, according to Reconnecting America, a non-profit group that encourages development near or along transit lines.

"As these cities grew, they realized that relying on the automobile was not enough," says William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association, a trade group that represents public transit providers. "New systems are virtually without exception meeting and exceeding ridership targets, and you're seeing land values (along transit lines) go up."

Once all the transit systems on the books are built by 2030, there will be 4,000 to 4,500 transit stations nationwide. There were 735 planned and proposed stations as of December 2005.

"Right now, there are about 6 million households that live within half a mile of stations," says Shelley Poticha, president of Reconnecting America. "The demand for housing near transit is going to grow to over 16 million. That's a big number."

Suburbs will change

In 1960, in the heyday of suburbia, half of households had children. By 2040, only about a quarter will. The USA will grow by 40 million households. About 35 million of them will not have children, Nelson says.

"Their demands are going to be different," he says. "Suburban areas will have to transform themselves to meet the new needs."

So will employers, says Roger-Mark De Souza, technical director of population, health and environment at the Population Reference Bureau, a non-profit think tank. Allowing workers to telecommute or follow flexible schedules can cut driving and increase productivity, he says.

The percentage of American households that "will want, will demand and will get their single-family detached homes on a lot" will remain high, Nelson says.

"Where it used to be 80%, it might slip down to 60%. ... We will never get rid of congestion, but we might be better able to handle it."

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