

Cape Coral set to mark 40 years as a city

Claims a complex, interesting history

By Brian Hubbard • bhubbard@news-press.com • August 13, 2010

Special page: See historic images of Cape Coral through the years, watch a documentary and profiles on popular attractions, scroll through a 40th anniversary timeline, click on key places on our Cape Coral map and more.

It has been known as many things: a waterfront wonderland, a sleepy bedroom community, a symbol of both unparalleled growth and crushing economic reality. Next week, the Cape will be known as something else, too — a city that endures.

Cape Coral, which has evolved from a swampy tourist destination into Southwest Florida's most populous community, will celebrate 40 years as an incorporated city Aug. 18.

"The city has grown more than I ever thought it would," said Paul Sanborn, the city's historian. "Things have changed, but mostly for the better." The city will celebrate with fireworks and a parade during the annual Coconut Festival from Nov. 12-14, said Connie Barron, city spokeswoman.

Community leaders are proud of what has been accomplished in 40 years: a thriving tapestry of public, private and charter schools; progressive outlets for artistic expression; a nationally recognized parks system; and a sense of togetherness buoyed by youth sports and events such as Red, White & Boom.

But work is under way to establish a new identity as economic recovery continues. A Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic will open in 2012, and a new industrial park is expected to attract high-tech businesses. Planning is under way to beef up downtown with night-life options designed to redefine urban living.

Whatever the future brings, officials hope longtime residents will celebrate the city's birthday alongside the younger families who are trying to create their

own legacy in a complicated and unique city. "There will never be another community or development like this," Sanborn said.

Building blocks

- Jack and Leonard Rosen, brothers from Baltimore, visited the area in the late 1950s. They purchased 103 square miles for \$678,000 in 1957 and went on to sell more than \$801 million worth of property in 10 years.

They carved a maze of canals to help drain the swampy land and ensure waterfront homes all around, giving Cape Coral its identity.

- As the 1960s waned, the Rosens' company, Gulf American Corp., wanted to shed responsibility for maintaining streets.

Voters approved incorporation 2,249- 1,995 during a tense meeting Aug. 18, 1970. The city's population was about 15,000.

The newly formed city council appointed Paul Fickinger as the first mayor.

Forging ahead

- The need for medical facilities grew as the population reached about 20,000 in 1975. Cape Coral Hospital, with just 94 beds, opened in 1977,

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overlooking dirt roads in almost every direction.

- Cape Coral grew 300 percent between 1970 and 1985, as the city became a magnet for young couples looking for affordable housing, good schools and safe streets. The city passed a bond to fund sports complexes and road improvements.

The city made a long leap north and west.

- In 1990, Cape Coral had the highest median income in Lee County at \$30,000.

Lee Memorial acquired Cape Coral Hospital for \$152 million in 1996.

- The decade is still defined by the \$174 million Midpoint Memorial Bridge, which opened in 1997 and ushered in an age of unprecedented commercial and residential real estate growth.

Recent history

- Cape Coral made national headlines in the early part of the 2000s as bigger construction jobs pushed the population past 100,000. Developments such as Tarpon Point and Cape Harbour gave the Cape a taste of modern, luxury living.

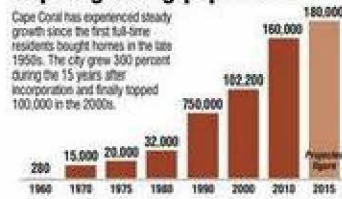
- Just a few years later, the national economy sputtered to a halt and Cape Coral was taken to task for its unchecked growth. Empty, foreclosed houses dotted the landscape, property values hit all-time lows and numerous small businesses closed.

- Residents became fed up with City Council in 2009 as it waffled on utilities expansion in the southwest part of the city. The wave of discontentment swept current Mayor John Sullivan into office.

— Staff writers Don Ruane and Brian Liberatore contributed to this report. Freelance writer Lindsay Downey also contributed.

Cape's growing population

Cape Coral has experienced steady growth since the first full-time residents bought homes in the late 1950s. The city grew 300 percent during the 15 years after incorporation and finally topped 100,000 in the 2000s.

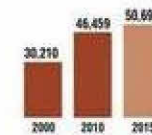


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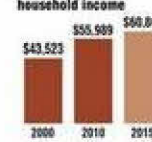
Demographics

Note: 2015 are projected figures.

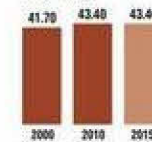
Families



Median household income



Median Age



Race/ethnicity

Note: 2015 are projected figures.

2000



2010



2015 (Projected)



Note: Percentages for American Indian alone and Asian or Pacific Islander alone were excluded because totals were below 2 percent. People of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU AND THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

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