

Madera County seventh-fastest in growth

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A recent report by the state Department of Finance shows California's population has topped 38 million, with Madera County ranked seventh for fastest rate of growth at 1.76 percent.

Those rates are typical, according to Supervisor Tom Wheeler. "We've been growing good," he said.

Wheeler added that the county's cheaper cost of living and the Mountain Area's beauty remain the county's two major draws to new residents. When gas is reasonably low, he said, its easy for Fresno workers to escape the city and live in the mountains. Many from the state's large urban areas also retire to the mountains, where the life is slow and investing in a home is relatively cheap.

Giving any more specific context to the population figures, however, is difficult, said Madera County's assistant planning director, Joel Moses. Because large segments of the county are unincorporated and data is not categorized by individual areas, few inferences can be drawn for the Mountain Area.

Numbers are lumped, he said, for grants which help pay for county services. The only caveat is internal road funding for either city or county roadways, which is based on a population division between the cities and unincorporated areas.

The county's unincorporated communities -- Ahwahnee, Bass Lake, Berenda, Coarsegold, Fairmead, Madera Ranchos, North Fork, Oakhurst, O'Neals, Raymond, and Rolling Hills -- are lumped together with the most recent population figures totaling 75,397 -- an increase of 699 since 2007.

As for the two cities, Chowchilla increased just over 1,000 to reach 18,780 and Madera increased just over 1,200 to reach 56,710 by the end of December.

For more detailed information, the county relies on the national census, conducted every 10 years. But even then, the lag time of collecting the information to processing is two years -- a span of time where categories such as local housing markets can shift dramatically. And the 10-year data collection gap doesn't help.

At the Jan. 6 meeting of the county Board of Supervisors, a presentation by Moses did note a few trends.

In the past five years, unincorporated areas have installed 271 mobile homes while the cities, combined, have only installed one. Meanwhile, the unincorporated areas, over the same period, have not built any multiple-family units, while the cities have built 145.

Also noted was the vacancy rate, which has remained at zero. In the department's population report, however, it is predicted that figure will change by next year to reflect the decline in the housing market.

The state reported that nearby Mariposa county lost two residents, leaving its population of 18,297 largely unchanged. And Fresno county maintains its ranking as the 10th-largest county in the state with 936,828.