



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

The city of Soledad had an 18 percent growth in its population during the past five years, as is evident by new homes, new shopping centers and increased foot traffic along this Front Street sidewalk in May 2005.

Lower-priced homes can be found south

In laid-back communities, population boom is expected

Staff report

Nestled along Highway 101 like beads on a string, four cities about a half-hour's drive apart make up the population centers in south Monterey County.

The communities — Gonzales, Soledad, Greenfield and King City — offer a different pace of life than busier cities like Salinas and Monterey.

More-affordable housing markets and an increase in new businesses are helping fuel growth in King City and Soledad, while Gonzales and Greenfield focus on redevelopment projects.

Gonzales City Manager Rene Mendez said his city and the rest of south county are on the verge of a population boom.

During the past five years, growth in south county ranged from 1.7 percent in King City to 18 percent in Soledad, compared with 5.8 percent for the county as a whole, according to data from the state department of finance.

In the next 20 years, growth in the region could add another 1.9 percent to 4.7 percent — or an additional 55,000 to 80,500 people.

That's partly due to prices. While the median house price in Monterey County is about \$650,000, house prices in south county are about \$100,000 less.

The area offers outdoor recreation, such as Pinnacles National Monument, wine tasting in Gonzales and the Salinas Valley Fair in King City every May.

"We're right in the middle of it

all," said Gonzales Mayor Matt Gourley.

But the region's attractiveness means new residents, and with new residents comes more traffic.

"South county has already become a bedroom community," said Gonzales City Councilwoman Maria Orozco. "There's more land, housing is more reasonable, more affordable, but we have seen prices of homes go up, even in the south.

"And the more people are in the community, the more impact we have on the highways. I've seen it in traffic; there was never traffic before."

Besides these cities, south county is home to several unincorporated communities, including Chualar, San Ardo, San Lucas, Bradley, Jolon and Parkfield.

Gonzales is the county's wine capital

Downtown revitalization project planned for small city

Staff report

Laying claim to the title of wine capital of Monterey County, Gonzales is the smallest city in south county and seems happy with that distinction.

Gonzales Mayor Matt Gourley said the city is taking steps toward "carefully planned growth."

"We are concerned about having the infrastructure for growth," Gourley said. "We don't want growth to be a detriment to residents; we want it to enhance our lifestyle."

City Manager Rene Mendez said because the city has focused on building its infrastructure, it doesn't have the same issues seen on the Monterey Peninsula and in Salinas.

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SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

Father Michael Volk, right, pastor of St. Theodore's Church, pours a bottle of wine during the blessing of the grapes in December 2003 at Blackstone Winery in Gonzales. The ceremony is an annual celebration of the year's harvest.