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Charlotte holds in biggest 20 cities

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Charlotte held steady as the nation's 20th-biggest city last year, remaining the largest in the Carolinas, according to U.S. Census data released today.

Raleigh grew even faster. The state capital is still much smaller, but it climbed from 53rd to 51st among the most populous cities nationwide, with 3.9 percent growth compared with Charlotte's 2.3 percent increase.

New York, Los Angeles and Chicago held the top three spots, respectively.

But Charlotte's booming growth has helped it secure a place with the old giants. The Queen City clocked in with 630,478 people in the July 2006 estimate, behind Baltimore and just ahead of El Paso. It will grow even more when it annexes about 5 square miles -- and 7,000 new residents -- on Saturday.

Within the state, Union County's towns and villages accounted for 12 of the 35 fastest-growing municipalities. Fairview, which didn't exist as a town six years ago, grew faster than its neighbors, with a nearly 10 percent increase to reach almost 5,000.

Union County has been among the fastest growing places around the country for years. But N.C. demographer Bill Tillman cautions, "Fastest growing may or may not be meaningful."

He notes that towns such as Stallings have boomed in part by annexing new developments, increasing population numbers by thousands.

Also, towns that start out small show a disproportionate growth rate. The population of Gaston County's Spencer Mountain, for example, grew by some 21 percent over six years. But in raw numbers it just increased from 52 to 63 people.

The growth does prompt big changes for some towns.

Mineral Springs, North Carolina's eighth-fastest growing municipality, with nearly 2,500 people, adopted new growth policies in February that discourage high-density developments. Mayor Rick Becker said he hopes the zoning will smooth out jumps in growth caused as new subdivisions cropped up in the Union County town in recent years.

The Rankings

20. Charlotte 630,478

51. Raleigh 356,321 77. Greensboro 236,865

93. Durham 209,009

199. Columbia 119,961 229. Charleston 107,845

SOURCE: U.S. Census, 2006 est. population