Expansion, then empty spaces: Metro Atlanta's outer limits, a big draw in boom times, see growth slow to a crawl.

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The surging population wave that turned Atlanta's outer counties into some of the fastest growing areas in the country has subsided to a ripple.

The recession and the housing crisis all but stifled growth in the exurbs --- think counties like Paulding, Newton, Walton and Barrow --- according to recent census figures. While growth slowed across the Atlanta region, counties closer to the urban core --- Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb and Gwinnett --- were affected less.

It was a pattern repeated around the country. The hot question now is: Are we looking at a blip or a historic reversal?

In Atlanta, the crash gave us zombie subdivisions, empty lots and unfinished roads. When Kerry Morris, 67, moved into the Henderson Ridge community in Dallas in 2007, 40 homes were planned, but builders quit when it was half full. Now she has snakes and coyotes for neighbors.

"It's undeveloped," she said.

To examine the phenomenon in metro Atlanta, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution compared growth rates for the periods 2006-07 and 2010-11 --- just before and just after the recession. Similar analyses of national patterns have prompted some demographers and national publications to declare a sea change in America: the demise of a six-decade exodus from dense central cities to more pastoral suburban and exurban areas.

"America's romance with sprawl may not be completely over," USA Today wrote, "but it's definitely on the rocks."

And some experts told the AJC the same thing.

"It's the collapse of the fringe suburbs," said Chris Leinberger, during a break in the Urban Land Institute's "Sustainability Summit" in Atlanta this week, where he was the keynote speaker. "Just as the center cities were thrown away in '50s and '60s, and high-end housing became slums, we'll see some, if not all, of fringe suburban housing become slums," said Leinberger, a leader in the new urbanist movement.
Not so fast, say others. "Does that mean places like Paulding County are not going to grow anymore?" asked Michael Chriszt, vice president in the research department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. "I don't think we can make that leap." Growth will be slower, said Chriszt, but it will come.

"I live in northwestern Cobb, next to Paulding," said Chriszt. "I haven't woken up to the sound of hammers in years, but on Saturday morning we're hearing them again."

'Slow road back'

Construction is audible, but it's not roaring. Paulding grew at 5.2 percent from 2006 to 2007. That rate dropped to .5 percent from 2010 to 2011. Other outer counties experienced the same slowdown. Newton dropped from 5 percent to .7 percent; Walton from 4.7 percent to .6 percent; Barrow from 5.4 percent to .3 percent.

"It will be a slow road back," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution. "It may be too drastic to say this is the end of it everywhere for all time, but I don't think we've seen any growth slowdowns as pervasive as this."

Some suggest that exurbanites are moving closer to the center city because in-town housing is finally more affordable. The old formula for finding a house was "drive until you qualify," said Eugene James, director of the Atlanta office of real estate data firm Metrostudy. "Right now folks can afford to move closer in and live closer in while home prices are suppressed," he said.

But Rajeev Dhawan, an economic forecaster at Georgia State University, doubts that. People are simply not moving anywhere, he said. "The movement of the people always stops during the bad times."

Hard-hit by unemployment

Unemployment data, like population figures, suggest that the bad times were especially bad for the exurbs.

The unemployment rate increased in the core counties by an average of 113 percent from 2007 to 2011, versus 126 percent in the exurbs, according to an analysis of figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For example, Fulton County's unemployment rate grew from 5 percent to 10.4 percent, an increase of 110 percent. Paulding County, however, saw its unemployment rate rise from 4.2 percent to 10.1 percent, or 140 percent.

The pause in growth has brought a few benefits. It was a "welcome relief" for many schools around the metro area, said Herb Garrett, executive director of the Georgia School Superintendents Association.
"There was a time that Henry was growing 3,000 kids a year," he said. Gwinnett's growth was double that rate. School construction couldn't keep up with the boom and many students in those counties spent their academic careers in trailers, he said.

This shift gives metro school systems a chance to finish building the projects already on the books, and lose the portables.

Solution: 'Try harder'

As the economy rebounds, say most Georgia experts, the outer counties will see the return of growth. Few expect the pattern of outward expansion, launched in the 1890s when Joel Hurt built Inman Park, to disappear. They also point out that an exurb does not always look like an exurb.

Woodstock is 30 miles from the city center, but with investment in its downtown, through the Hedgewood Redevelopment, it is working to support a dense, walkable environment, said Richard McLeod, director of community development. Parts of downtown Woodstock saw foreclosure --- "we took it on the chin like everybody else" --- but the area is emerging more rapidly than other areas in the outer ring, he said.

Douglas County has also seen its share of losses, including the Wal-Mart and Cub Foods that once anchored a 33-acre mall in Douglasville.

"Our solution is to try harder," said Chris Pumphrey, executive director of the Development Authority of Douglas County. The mall now hosts Georgia Highlands College, among other tenants.

Douglas County saw a dramatic drop in growth, which affected Tributary, an ambitious development on the banks of Sweetwater Creek. The upscale community, which combines hiking trails, a tennis center, Earthcraft homes and an emphasis on outdoor recreation, stalled during the downturn. About 400 of the planned 2,500 homes were built, said Phillip Sisk, chairman of the civic affairs committee within the homeowners association.

That doesn't bother Sisk. He likes his neighbors, enjoys the community chili cook-offs, and says he's only 20 minutes from the symphony and the ballet. "We don't feel like we're being affected too adversely --- as long as we don't look at what our house values are."

Staff data specialist Kelly Guckian contributed to this article.

SLOWER GROWTH IN THE OUTER COUNTIES

Growth has slowed throughout metro Atlanta since the recession, particularly in the outer counties, such as Cherokee, Bartow, Paulding and Rockdale. The map compares growth rates from before and after the recession, 2006-2007 compared to 2010-2011. The darker the color the greater the drop in the rate. Fayette and Clayton counties actually showed an increase in their growth rate.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates

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Mapping by AJC data specialist Kelly Guckian