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City population back in half-million range

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The city of Atlanta is booming.

Its population has surpassed the half-million mark, according to census numbers released today.

It's the largest number of people the city has seen for more than 40 years and likely ever.

"We're delighted," said Peggy McCormick, president of the Atlanta Development Authority. "We think there is a fundamental restructuring going on nationally. People are either going to move into the city, or closer to where they work," McCormick said.

Atlanta added an estimated 20,623 people from 2006 to 2007, according to U.S. Census Bureau data released today. The city ranks seventh nationally for the total number of people added between July 2006 and July 2007.

"That's a dramatic change," said Mike Alexander, chief of the Atlanta Regional Commission's research division.

Atlanta ranks 33rd nationally in city population size. The city is enjoying the wave of urban revival that's affecting the country.

In Atlanta, baby boomers seek in-town living, young professionals stay put after attending college and people are tired of traffic congestion. Add to that the increase in gas prices, and in-town living is likely to become more of a trend, McCormick said.

"People want out of their cars. They want the option of walkability," she said.

Atlanta had lost population over the years, as did many urban areas.

In the 1990s, the city had about 100,000 fewer people than it had in the 1960s.

In 1960, Atlanta's population was 487,455, according to census numbers. The city started to lose people in the 1980s, and the trend continued until the population hit a low of about 393,314 in 1991.

People started leaving cities and moving to the suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s, Alexander said. It was a national trend.

One factor was President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Federal Highway Act.

"It really stimulated growth of the suburbs," said Jeff DuFresne, executive director of Urban Land Institute, Atlanta. "At the time, what was important was that everyone had a house and a plot of land."

DuFresne said now more people are looking for the kind of 24-hour living associated with New York or Chicago.

During the 1990s, you had more people driving back and forth on the highway, but on TV they were watching "Seinfeld" or "Friends" and seeing people walk to everything, DuFresne said.

"It had an impact."

Staff writer Marcus Garner contributed to this article.