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From the Los Angeles Times

60 million Californians by mid-century

Riverside will become the second most populous county behind Los Angeles and Latinos the dominant ethnic group, study says.

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Over the next half-century, California's population will explode by nearly 75%, and Riverside will surpass its bigger neighbors to become the second most populous county after Los Angeles, according to state Department of Finance projections released Monday.

California will near the 60-million mark in 2050, the study found, raising questions about how the state will look and function and where all the people and their cars will go. Dueling visions pit the iconic California building block of ranch house, big yard and two-car garage against more dense, high-rise development.

But whether sprawl or skyscrapers win the day, the Golden State will probably be a far different and more complex place than it is today, as people live longer and Latinos become the dominant ethnic group, eclipsing all others combined.

Some critics forecast disaster if gridlock and environmental impacts are not averted. Others see a possible economic boon, particularly for retailers and service industries with an eye on the state as a burgeoning market.

"It's opportunity with baggage," said Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., in "a country masquerading as a state."

Other demographers argue that the huge population increase the state predicts will occur only if officials complete major improvements to roads and other public infrastructure. Without that investment, they say, some Californians would flee the state.

If the finance department's calculations hold, California's population will rise from 34.1 million in 2000 to 59.5 million at the mid-century point, about the same number of people as Italy has today.

And its projected growth rate in those 50 years will outstrip the national rate — nearly 75% compared with less than 50% projected by the federal government. That could translate to increased political clout in Washington, D.C.

Southern California's population is projected to grow at a rate of more than 60%, according to the new state figures, reaching 31.6 million by mid-century. That's an increase of 12.1 million over just seven counties.

L.A. County alone will top 13 million by 2050, an increase of almost 3.5 million residents. And Riverside County — long among the fastest-growing in the state — will triple in population to 4.7 million by mid-century.

Riverside County will add 3.1 million people, according to the new state figures, eclipsing Orange and San Diego to become the second most populous in the state. With less expensive housing than the coast, Riverside County has grown by more than 472,000 residents since 2000, according to state estimates.

But many residents face agonizingly long commutes to work in other areas. And Monday, the state's growth projections raised some concerns in the Inland Empire.

Registered nurse Fifi Bo moved from Los Angeles to Corona nine years ago so she could buy a house and avoid urban congestion. But she'd consider moving even farther east now that Riverside County is grappling with its own crowding problems.

"But where am I going? People used to move to Victorville, but [housing prices in] Victorville already got high," the 36-year-old said as she fretted about traffic and smog and public services stretched thin. "We don't know where to go. Maybe Arizona."

John Husing, an economist who studies the Inland Empire, is betting that even in land-rich Riverside County, more vertical development is on the horizon. Part of the reason: a multi-species habitat conservation plan that went into effect in 2005, preserving 550,000 acres of green space that otherwise would have vanished.

"The difficult thing will be for anybody who likes where they live in Riverside County because it's rural," Husing said. "In 2050, you might still find rural out by Blythe, but other than that, forget rural."

Husing predicts that growth will be most dramatic beyond the city of Riverside as the patches of empty space around communities such as Palm Springs, Perris and Hemet begin to fill in with housing tracts. The Coachella Valley, for example, will become fully developed and seem like less of a distinct area outside of Riverside, he said. "It'll be desert urban, but it'll be urban. Think of Phoenix," he said.

Expect a lot of the new development in Riverside County to go up along the 215 Freeway between Perris and Murrieta, according to Riverside County Planning Director Ron Goldman. Thousands of homes have popped up in that area in the last decade, and Goldman said applications for that area indicate condominiums are next. The department is so busy that he's hiring 10 people who'll start in the next month.

"We have over 5,000 active development applications in processing right now," he said.

No matter how much local governments build in the way of public works and how many new jobs are attracted to the region — minimizing the need for long commutes — Husing figures that growth will still overwhelm the area's roads.

USC Professor Genevieve Giuliano, an expert on land use and transportation, would probably agree. Such massive growth, if it occurs, she said, will require huge investment in the state's highways, schools, and energy and sewer systems at a "very formidable cost."

If those things aren't built, Giuliano questioned whether the projected population increases will occur. "Sooner or later, the region will not be competitive and the growth is not going to happen," she said.

If major problems like traffic congestion and housing costs aren't addressed, Giuliano warned, the middle class is going to exit California, leaving behind very high-income and very low-income residents.

"It's a political question," said Martin Wachs, a transportation expert at the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica. "Do we have the will, the consensus, the willingness to pay? If we did, I think we could manage the growth."

The numbers released Monday underscore most demographers' view that the state's population is pushing east, from both Los Angeles and the Bay Area, to counties such as Riverside and San Bernardino as well as half a dozen or so smaller Central Valley counties.

Sutter County, for example, is expected to be the fastest-growing on a percentage basis between 2000 and 2050, jumping 255% to a population of 282,894, the state said. Kern County is expected to see its population more than triple to 2.1 million by mid-century.

In Southern California, San Diego County is projected to grow by almost 1.7 million residents and Orange County by 1.1 million. Even Ventura County — where voters have imposed some limits on urban sprawl — will see its population jump 62% to more than 1.2 million if the projections hold.

The Department of Finance releases long-term population projections every three years. Between the last two reports, number crunchers have taken a more detailed look at California's statistics and taken into account the likelihood that people will live longer, said chief demographer Mary Heim.

The result?

The latest numbers figure the state will be much more crowded than earlier estimates (by nearly 5 million) and that it will take a bit longer than previously thought for Latinos to become the majority of California's population: 2042, not 2038.

The figures show that the majority of California's growth will be in the Latino population, said Dowell Myers, a professor of urban planning and demography at USC, adding that "68% of the growth this decade will be Latino, 75% next and 80% after that."

That should be a wake-up call for voting Californians, Myers said, pointing out a critical disparity. Though the state's growth is young and Latino, the majority of voters will be older and white — at least for the next decade.

"The future of the state is Latino growth," Myers said. "We'd sure better invest in them and get them up to speed.... Older white voters don't see it that way. They don't realize that someone has to replace them in the work force, pay for their benefits and buy their house."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Changing face of California

By mid-century, Latinos will constitute a majority of California's population, according to new projections from the state Department of Finance.

2000

White: 47%

Latino: 32%

Asian: 11%

Black: 7%

Other: 3%

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2050

White: 26%

Latino: 52%

Asian: 13%

Black: 5%

Other: 4%

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Source: California Dept. of Finance

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Population increases

In millions

County	2000	2050	%
Riverside	1.6	4.7	203
Imperial	0.14	0.39	170
San Bern.	1.7	3.7	113
Ventura	0.76	1.2	62
San Diego	2.8	4.5	59

Orange	2.9	4.0	39
Los Angeles	9.6	13.1	36
California	34.1	59.5	74

Percent column shows rankings by growth rate, based on unrounded numbers.

Source: California Dept. of Finance

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