New census numbers show Palm Beach County's 85-plus crowd grows 41%

By CHRISTINE STAPLETON AND GEORGE BENNETT

Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

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Taking a break from his poolside card game at the Century Village retirement community near West Palm Beach, 87-year-old Lou Hazan tried to offer some insights into the modern octogenarian lifestyle while the other players razzed him.

"Sometimes it's a little hard trying to find a woman that's about 20 years younger than me," said Hazan, a widower who moved to South Florida about 15 years ago.

Born before talking movies or transatlantic flight or Herbert Hoover's presidency, Hazan and others in the 85-and-older crowd are one of the fastest growing segments of Palm Beach County's population, according to a new batch of 2010 Census data that breaks down Florida's population by age.

The new figures show Palm Beach County now has Florida's largest number of people who are 85 and older -- 49,205. Ten years ago those bragging rights belonged to Miami-Dade County.

Although Palm Beach County's overall population grew 16.7 percent between 2000 and 2010, its 85-plus population grew 40.7 percent.

Palm Beach County now has 99,849 people who are 80 and older - nearly the same number as the city of West Palm Beach has residents.

The number of older seniors has soared, but seniors as a whole are a declining portion of Palm Beach County's population. The number of county residents who are 65 and older grew 8.8 percent between 2000 and 2010, a slower rate of growth than the countywide average.

Seniors are now 21.6 percent of the county population, down from 23.2 percent in 2000 and 24.3 percent in 1990.

That trend won't last long, demographers predict, as Baby Boomers reach retirement age. The first Boomers turned 65 this year.

"In many ways I think the decade we're in is going to be the pivotal decade," said Jim Murley, a former Florida Department of Community Affairs official who now directs Florida Atlantic University's Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions.
With Florida’s status as a retiree haven, planners have long anticipated an influx of retired Boomers. Now they wonder how much of an impact the current economic downturn and real estate bust will have on those projections.

"Anecdotally, you wonder, can they actually sell their houses in other places and move to Florida?" Murley said.

Advances in medicine and overall health, meanwhile, mean that Palm Beach County and other places can expect to see growing numbers of the so-called "old elderly," said Stan Smith, director of University of Florida’s Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"It’s the old elderly that are the fastest growing segment of the population," Smith said. "Certainly that has a lot of social and probably fiscal implications."

Staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.