More South Floridians turn to roommates to help pay bills

South Floridians are among the nation's leaders in opening their homes to roommates to help pay bills. And they're finding an increasing number of people who want a room — but not an entire home — to rent.

"We're busier than ever," said Susie Stein, owner of the Fort Lauderdale-based Roommate Finders, which is taking its website nationwide. "The economy is so shaky and unstable that people are wanting to have security and are taking whatever steps they need to do."

That includes taking in roommates, Stein said.

"It's definitely on the uptick," agreed Dan Ross, owner of the national RoommateExpress website that has noticed South Florida becoming one of the top areas in the nation for homeowners renting out rooms. The other hot spots for roommates — the Phoenix, Las Vegas and Tampa-St. Petersburg metro areas — also are having to dig themselves out of a housing bust that left thousands scrambling to find a new place to live or else find new income to keep their homes from being foreclosed, he said.

"You have a perfect storm of people who are losing homes while others are trying to hold on," Ross said.

In just three years, from 2007 to 2010, the number of Floridians living with a sibling or as a boarder or roommate jumped 19 percent in Florida, while it grew 3 percent in Broward and 10 percent in Palm Beach County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

People in Palm Beach County might be looking for roommates more than their counterparts in Broward because they've been hit harder by layoffs, said William B. Stronge, an economics professor emeritus at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

"It's one of the most obvious ways of dealing with the recession," Stronge said.

And the number of roommates and boarders is still growing: South Florida has recently been getting people moving in from out-of-state to take new jobs or internships and some have been looking to rent out a room while they get used to the area. Stein said she helps them find rooms close to their work. "Fort Lauderdale, Plantation — they don't know the difference," Stein said.

Throughout South Florida, neighbors have noticed changes with more adults living at some houses, said Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, economics professor who directs the Center of Economic
Research at Florida International University in Miami-Dade County. Near his own home, for example, there are five adults living in one house, he said.

Indeed, the demand for rooms has helped launch a fledgling industry of investors buying houses or condo units and then renting them by the room. That has helped fill some new condominium complexes that were finished just as the housing boom went bust, including one near the main FAU campus off Glades Road that has since become occupied by many students renting rooms, said economist Stronge.

Some South Floridians are advertising on Craigslist to find roommates to help pay expenses.

Carlos Torres figures he can rent out two rooms in his large Plantation home that he recently bought. "It's a lot easier to do when you have a large house with so much space available," he said. That ensures privacy for everyone, Torres said.

He already has one boarder he describes as "very quiet." Torres is now looking for another one to pay $650 a month for a large room and private bathroom that offers high-speed Internet service and cable TV with all utilities paid.

"This room comes with its own refrigerator and microwave," he adds in Craigslist.

In Boca Raton, Don Stone is trying to find his first roommate to share his three-bedroom, three-bath town house for $650 a month, all utilities included. He wants to use the extra money to help his son buy a car.

But Stone admits the search has been challenging.

There have been interested people but they couldn't pass a credit check that Stone's homeowner's association requires.

This happens often — many people are looking to move to others' homes because they have credit problems and many apartment complexes won't rent to them, said Ross of RoommateExpress. Some dinged their credit score when they lost their own home to foreclosure, Ross added.

Other prospective roommates liked Stone's town house but he worries about them being older and having difficulty climbing the unit's stairs to what would be their second-floor bedroom, Stone said.

Again, this is more common that what most think, Ross said.

Many wanting to rent a room are 40 and up and are starting over from a divorce, foreclosure or other life change, he said.