

Dothan Eagle

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Bama rush

Drop in Florida's population adds to growth for Alabama

Debbie Ingram
dingram@dothan eagle.com

Lillian Vickers doesn't have to think very long about why she left Florida.

"Three hurricanes in 15 months. It got to be too much," said Vickers, who relocated to Dothan from Okeechobee, Fla., in October 2006.

How she and her husband — and the family dog — came here, of all places, had to do with proximity. Vickers has family in Tallahassee and a niece in Enterprise, and because her husband is retired military, they liked being close to Fort Rucker.

"We liked the area," she said. "I love the weather. It is always hot in Florida. Compared to Florida, we have seasons here. The trees turn orange and red and yellow in the fall."

Then there are those other reasons: low taxes, no garbage fees, no need for flood insurance and better insurance rates overall.

Neighboring Florida has always been a mecca for retirees, but for the first time in more than 60 years, the state's population has declined, according to a study by the University of Florida. The Bureau of Economic and Business Research reports the state lost 58,294 people from April 1, 2008, to April 1, 2009.

While that decline is not astronomical considering the state's population is about 18.3 million, it is the first downturn since 1946.

Chris and Tom Bindley relocated to Dothan in late 2007 from Jacksonville, Fla., where Chris Bindley said they felt they had dodged bullets for some years.

"The city was due for a huge hurricane," she said. "It had been 55 to 60 years since we actually got hit. We lived on the Nassau River, so we knew if it ever came, it would have destroyed our home."

Bindley said the couple, who have family in southwest Georgia and the Florida Panhandle, came to Dothan because of the restaurants and the medical facilities.

"My husband has had eight bypasses," she said. "We need good doctors. We checked into the doctors and medical facilities here and were very, very impressed."

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Both couples are retirees who moved to Dothan and got involved. The families have joined churches and other organizations, including the Dothan Newcomers Club, which they call a god-send for new residents. They also purchased upscale homes here.

Though there is currently a downturn in home sales, real estate agents have sold a lot of homes to relocating Floridians over the last several years.

Retirees like the Bindleys and Vickers are the very people mayor-elect Mike Schmitz hopes to attract. Retirees are good for the community, he said. They are involved, come with resources and contribute to the local economy. When he was seeking the mayor's post, Schmitz spoke of retiree attraction as a priority, and said he could "close the deal" when it comes to



Jay Hare / jhare@dothan eagle.com

Tom and Chris Bindley practice their golf games behind their home Thursday afternoon. The couple moved to Dothan in October 2007 from Jacksonville, Fla. Over the last year, Florida posted a decline in population for the first time since 1946.

getting them to Dothan.

"Now is the perfect time. Being named the eighth least expensive community to live in out of 360 is important to them," Schmitz said, "and we are one of the few states not to tax retirement pay. That is

big to these folks. I would like to see an organized effort of recruitment. Aviation and Fort Rucker brings a lot of retirees here. They see Dothan as a clean, safe, fun place that's inexpensive. We may have something to offer them."

The city of Dothan is the fourth fastest growing city in the state. The Census Bureau estimates the city will count 70,000 people by 2010 and the county 100,000. The state has an estimated population of 4.6 million, up 4.8 percent from 2000.