

FLORIDA

# Will people leave after devastating hurricanes?



David DeMeza pulls his belongings through sand-lined streets Oct. 2, after Hurricane Helene hit Treasure Island, Fla. MIKE CARLSON — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY MIKE SCHNEIDER

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ORLANDO, Fla.>> The news rippled through Treasure Island, Fla., almost like a third storm: The mayor planned to move off the barrier island a month after Hurricane Helene flooded tens of thousands of homes along the Gulf Coast and two weeks after Hurricane Milton also ravaged the state.

Mayor Tyler Payne's home had been flooded and damaged beyond repair, he explained in a message to Treasure Island residents, and he and his husband can't afford to rebuild. He also was stepping down as mayor.

"While it pains my heart to make this decision in the midst of our recovery from Hurricanes Helene and Milton, this is the best decision for me and my family," Payne, who had held the office for more than three years and was a fourth-generation Treasure Island resident, said Monday.



Up and down Florida's storm-battered Gulf Coast, residents are making the same calculations about whether they should stay or go. Can they afford to rebuild? What will insurance cover? People considering moving to Florida are contemplating whether it's worth the risk to go to a hurricane-prone state.

These existential questions about Florida's appeal are raised regularly after the state experiences a busy hurricane season, such as in 2004, when four hurricanes crossed the Sunshine State.

If moves into the state offer any answer, then hurricanes have served little as deterrents. Florida's population has grown by one-third to 23 million residents in the two decades since Charley, Frances, Jeanne and Ivan ravaged the state. Last year, Florida added more than 365,000 residents, second only to Texas among states.

On the other hand, there are signs that Florida's white-hot real estate market has cooled. Sales of single-family homes were down 12% in September compared with the same time in the previous year. But interest rates, rising home prices and skyrocketing insurance costs likely played bigger roles than the recent hurricanes. \*

"Florida recovers much faster than you think," said Brad O'Connor, chief economist for Florida Realtors.

### **What happens after a storm?**

Studies of hurricanes along the Gulf Coast have shown that any outbound migration tends to be short-lived, and if people do leave, it's usually a short-distance move, such as from a barrier island to the mainland. Older people with more financial resources are more likely to return to devastated communities.

When it comes to the housing market, there may be an initial shock to the supply as homeowners wait for reimbursement from insurance companies to fix up their homes or sell them.

But in the three years after a hurricane, home prices in areas of Florida that were hit by one are 5% higher on average than elsewhere in the state because of smaller supply, according to a study of the impact of hurricanes on Florida's housing market from 2000 to 2016. New homeowners tend to be richer than previous ones because wealthier buyers can absorb price increases. \*

Other factors that determine how quickly communities bounce back include whether homes were insured, the speed of insurance reimbursements and whether there are enough construction workers. Because of stricter building codes implemented in the years after Hurricane Andrew devastated South Florida in 1992, newer homes withstand hurricanes better than older ones, O'Connor said.

"If a property is damaged and uninsured, and the homeowner says, 'I don't want to deal with this,' there are always people willing to scoop up that property because it's valuable land," he said. "People build new homes under the new codes and there's less of an impact from hurricanes." \*

### **Short term and long term**

Recent storms offer examples of what happens to communities in the short term and longer term.

In Lee County, home to Fort Myers, Hurricane Ian made landfall two years ago in what had been one of the fastest-growing parts of the United States. Population growth slowed afterward to 1.5% from 4.4% before the storm. The number of households dropped from about 340,000 to about 326,000, according to the Census Bureau.

In 2019, three-quarters of all United Van Lines truck moves were into Lee County, and a quarter were outbound. But that dropped to two-thirds inbound and a third outbound in 2023 to 2024, the company told The Associated Press.



The share of people in their late 20s, 30s and early 40s increased, as did the share of men with no spouse or partner, reflecting an influx of construction and recovery workers. The share of the white population dropped, while it increased for Latinos. The percentage of utility and transportation workers in the county jumped, according to the Census Bureau.

Bay County, in the Panhandle, where Michael made landfall as the first Category 5 hurricane on the continental U.S. in a quarter century in 2018, offers a portrait of longer-term trends.

Four years later, Bay County had recovered its pre-hurricane population, which dropped almost 6% in the year after the storm.

Since Michael, the county has grown more diverse, wealthier and older, with the median age rising from 39.6 to 41.4 and more people identifying as multiracial or Hispanic.

### **Treasure Island's mayor**

In his message to constituents, Payne said he would stay connected to the Treasure Island community because his parents plan to rebuild on the barrier island, one of a string of beach towns along the Gulf of Mexico west of St. Petersburg known for motels, restaurants and bars lining the street. Payne, an attorney who also is an executive in his family's eyeglass-lenses manufacturing business, said in his message that his decision to move was difficult.

"I completely empathize with the difficult decisions that are facing so many of our residents," Payne said.

