



CAPE CORAL: AMERICA'S BEST KEPT SECRET

BASIC INFORMATION		World Rank	Similar to
Urban Area Population (2000)	330,000	Not Rated	
Urban Land Area: Square Miles (2000)	192	Not Rated	
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	1,700		
Density: Per Square Mile (2000)	497	Not Rated	
Density: Per Square Kilometer (2000)	700		
*Continuously built up area (Urban agglomeration) Land area & density rankings among the more than 750 urban areas with 500,000 population or more. Data from <i>Demographia World Urban Areas</i> (http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf)			

25 April 2010

I had the pleasure of speaking in Cape Coral, Florida recently. Cape Coral (also called Cape Coral-Fort Myers) is the 85th largest metropolitan area in the United States and the largest that I had not yet visited. Next on the list is number 150 Naples, located to the south of Cape Coral.

Cape Coral had been the fastest growing metropolitan area of more than 500,000 population in the United States from 2000 to 2007. In 2000, the metropolitan area had approximately 450,000 people, and by 2007 it was 585,000. However, the Great Recession took a significant toll on Cape Coral. The US housing bust hit Cape Coral perhaps more intensely than any area of its size, with prices dropping 70% from the peak to the trough. The population in 2009 was little changed from in 2007.

Cape Coral is so close to Naples that it would not be surprising if at some point the Census Bureau combines the two into a single metropolitan areas. The combination is likely to have more than 1,000,000 people by the 2020 census.

Location

Cape Coral is located on Florida's west coast, just south of Bradenton-Sarasota and 120 miles (200 kilometers) south of Tampa-St. Petersburg. The west coast of Florida south of Tampa-St. Petersburg may be the fastest growing area in the state. More than 1.5 million people now live between Tampa Bay and Naples.

Florida is a flat state, with the highest elevation about 300 feet (100 meters). But what Florida lacks in vertical beauty, it makes up for in its water views. The southwest coast has a number of wide

inlets and bays. There is a wide bay in the middle of the Cape Coral urban area, between the municipalities of Cape Coral and Fort Myers, which is the estuary of the Caloosahatchee River.

The city (municipality) of Cape Coral is also one of the fastest growing in the nation.

City of Canals

The city of Cape Coral's claim to fame is its canals. Actually, it may not be a claim to fame, because Cape Coral's canals are not among the most renown in the world. Yet, Cape Coral has more canal mileage than any other municipality in the world. Estimates indicate that there are 400 miles (650 kilometers) of canals in Cape Coral.

Downtown Cape Coral

Downtown Cape Coral is the type of place abhorred by elitist planners. There are no skyscrapers, nor is there the type of core that would have developed if Cape Coral had grown in the 1890s or the 1920s. There are no tony new urbanist neighborhoods, with their cafes walkably situated next to one another. Cape Coral is an urban area of the 20th and 21st century, not an attempt at throwback to a 19th Century urban form that existed primarily in the minds of the nostalgic.

Sister City?

Having just visited the canal urban area of Suzhou, China two months before, I felt it appropriate to conjecture that it would make sense for Cape Coral to pursue a sister city relationship with Suzhou. If Cape Coral has the longest length of canals in the world, then certainly Suzhou is second. Venice, while more pleasing architecturally to Westerners, would rank, at best, a distant third.

The Ultimate in Democratizing Prosperity

I have often noted that the rise of the middle class in the United States and throughout the developed world since World War II can be considered the democratization of prosperity. Never has so large a share of the population lived so well as has been achieved in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia and Japan.

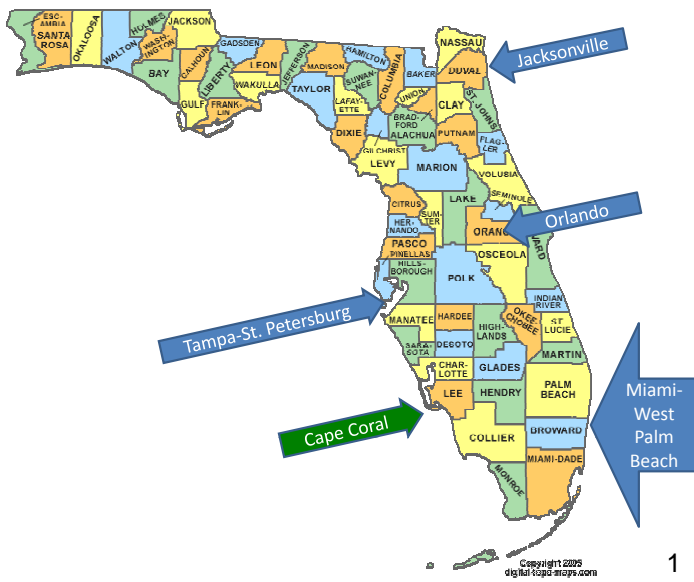
Perhaps the ultimate, however, in this democratization of prosperity is the nature of the housing. Most of Cape Coral is not composed of the up-scale residential neighborhoods that might be associated with water front living. In fact, housing in Cape Coral is the middle of the middle. Much of the housing appears to be smaller than 2,000 square feet. It tends to be ranch style, that much despised style of the 1960s to the 1980s. This is middle America, living in modest single-family detached housing, living on the waterfront. Many of these average American houses have docks in the back. A large share of the housing in Cape Coral is situated on canals. In parts of the city, there are canals behind virtually every house.

At the same, prosperity is moving in. Florida has strong growth management laws, which fueled the state's housing bubble (which would have been the worst in the nation were it not for California and its suburbs, Nevada and Arizona) by limiting development and increasing the price of land on which development was allowed. With the higher land prices, there is every incentive to sell to people interested in building more expensive houses, a phenomenon called (in the United States and

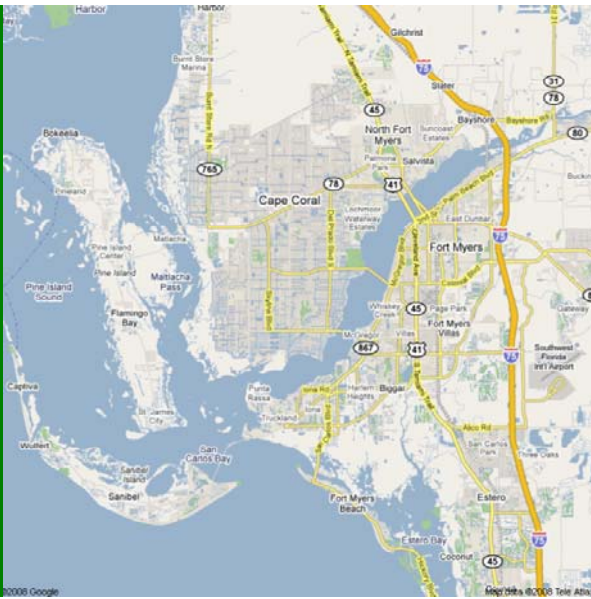
Australia) “McMansions. Cape Coral has its share of McMansions, which can be seen randomly distributed among the average American houses. They are generally quite attractive.

A 20th Century Metropolitan Area

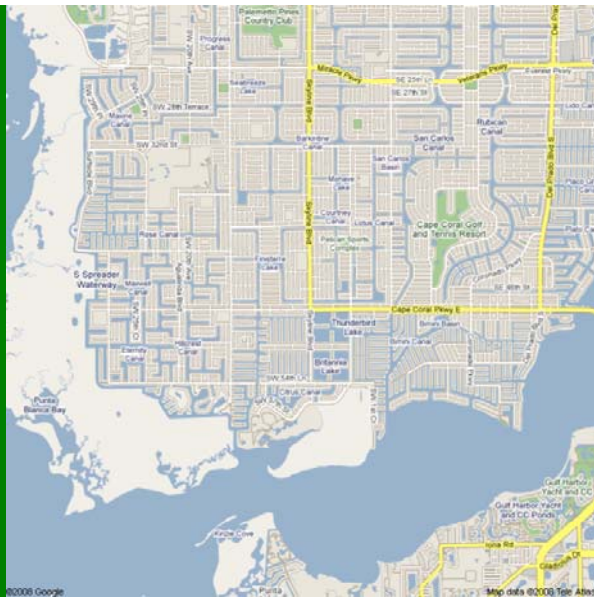
When Cape Coral-Fort Myers reaches 1,000,000 population, it is likely to be the first truly post war metropolitan area to do so, other than Las Vegas. Of course, Las Vegas is materially different than other metropolitan areas because of its strong entertainment industry, germinated by its legal gaming industry. Cape Coral, on the other hand, is simply an average American metropolitan area, virtually all of it typical of how the nation, as a whole, has developed over the past 60 years.



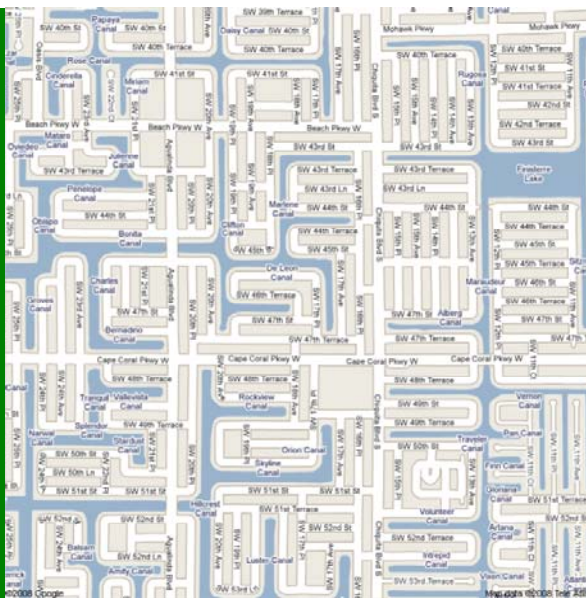
Cape Coral Urban Area



Cape Coral Core



Cape Coral SHOWING DENSITY OF CANALS





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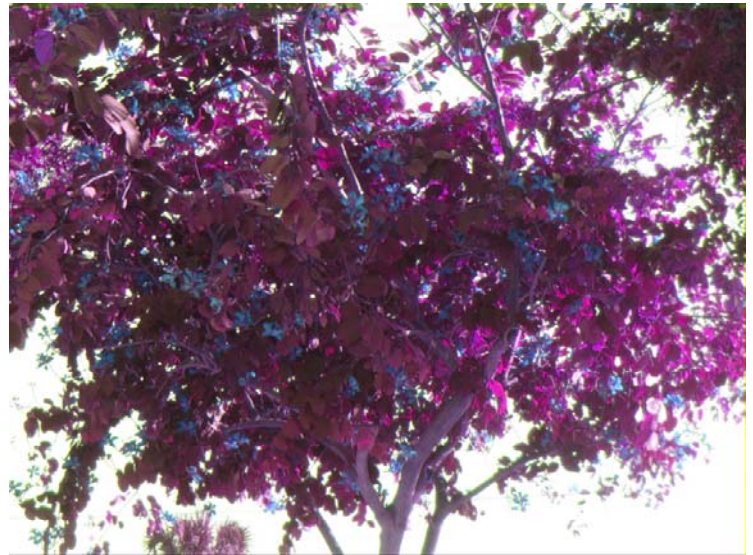
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