

Census '10 push starts early

By [David DeCamp](#), Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — The census is coming, but it's nothing to fear.

That was the message to St. Petersburg residents Wednesday from Mayor Bill Foster, local officials and U.S. Census Bureau representatives who want to improve the city's response rate from the 2000 count.

The 2010 census forms are set to hit the mail about March 15. Census Day is officially April 1.

The city had a below-average response rate of 63 percent last time, and much lower in quarters such as Midtown, where the response was 40 percent.

Local leaders gathered at Enoch Davis Center with pro boxer Winky Wright on Wednesday, urging residents not to ignore the 10-question mailer when it arrives because of privacy concerns or apathy.

The census count will help decide how much federal money cities receive for housing and social service programs. It also helps determine election districts, including possibly adding a new member of Congress from Florida. Corporations and retailers also rely on the data to decide how to market and where to locate offices.

"It's important for everyone to be counted in the city," Foster said. "It's a thousand dollars a person per year of revenue lost for those not counted."

This year, officials in Pinellas County have another reason to worry. Current census estimates show the county's population has fallen in recent years, after decades of growth.

Foster and Pinellas County Commissioner Calvin Harris, who said he doubts the population dropped, hope a better response rate will help offset any losses.

Despite potential scams and fears of lost privacy, this year's form will be the shortest ever — and private, officials promised.

"You have to get out of your shell of conspiracy," said City Council member Wengay Newton. "Don't believe the hype."

The Census Bureau has promoted events across the Tampa Bay area, hoping to boost participation everywhere.

Hillsborough County's 2000 response rate was 64 percent compared with Pinellas' 65 percent. Hernando had a 71 percent rate; Pasco's was 66 percent.

The national return rate was 67 percent.

Another upside to the census? Jobs, albeit temporary ones.

The federal agency promises jobs paying \$13.25 to \$14.50 a hour.

In the southern half of Pinellas, for example, the agency could hire 1,000 to 3,000 people, generally working May to July, said Barbara Mabee, partnership specialist for the census.

The workers will staff phone lines and offices, and go to homes this summer that didn't return forms.

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FAST FACTS

Census 2010

. **Forms:** A 10-question form will arrive in the mail in mid March, and residents should answer it and send it back. Answers are confidential, by law. All residents are counted, regardless of legal citizenship.

. **Help:** Assistance centers and phone lines will operate this spring to provide help.

. **Jobs:** For more information about the census or available jobs, go to 2010.census.gov.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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