

News

INTERACTIVE: Macomb County: Population 840,978 ... now bigger than Detroit which lost 25%

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By Chad Selweski
For The Oakland Press

Propelled by years of robust housing construction in the early years of the last decade, before the recession slammed the brakes on the building boom and chilled the local economy, sending some jobless residents fleeing for employment in other states, Macomb County's population stands at 840,978 — a 6.7 percent increase from 10 years ago.

The 2010 numbers show that Macomb has blown past Detroit in population, giving the county new status in the regional Big Four leadership along with Wayne and Oakland counties.

The census figures will also affect Macomb County's clout in Lansing and Washington, as legislative districts are redrawn to reflect the new landscape.

Macomb's share of funding

from Washington — where \$400 billion is tied to the census — and Lansing will also be impacted. At the local level, the numbers

will influence what roads are widened, what schools are closed and what parks are built.

At the same time, the face of Macomb County is changing, with the black population more than tripling over the last decade to about 72,000 residents of African-American descent.

Macomb's healthy overall population increase — the highest among southeast Michigan counties — was a relief for county and local officials who feared, at the height of the 2008-09 recession and foreclosure crisis, that Macomb might be headed in a downward spiral that could lead to double-digit losses for several communities.

"We're still the fastest-growing county in the region," said Steve Cassin, county director of Planning and Economic Development Department. "We knew people were still moving here, even during the hard times. We're still going up."

The data shows Macomb remains larger in population than five states — Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming.

The Census Bureau found that the county had gained 52,649 people since the last count, with most of the growth occurring in 2000-05. That keeps Macomb as the third-largest county in Michigan, behind Oakland and Wayne.

Under the new count, Macomb County features the third largest community in Michigan, Warren; the fourth largest, Sterling Heights; and the 10th largest, Clinton Township. Warren and Clinton Township maintained their standing while Sterling Heights moved up one spot, leapfrogging Flint.

The results show what many people already know: communities north of Hall Road that saw vacant fields and farmlands sprout with subdivisions continued to grow over the past decade.

The biggest population increases in Macomb were experienced in New Baltimore, 63 percent; Macomb Township, 58 percent; and Washington Township, 32 percent.

The largest losses came in Mount Clemens, 5.8 percent; St. Clair Shores, 5.4 percent; and Fraser, 5.3 percent. Fraser's No. 3 rank in the loss column surprised Cassin, who said the figures will need further scrutiny.

On the other hand, Warren limited its decline to 3 percent and Sterling Heights bucked the trends across the state by posting a 4.2 percent improvement. Sterling Heights Mayor Richard Notte said the city has some obvious advantages over other municipalities.

"Sterling Heights is known as one of the safest cities in America. Businesses have seen fit to reinvest, build and relocate in our city, as witnessed by more than \$1 billion in development over the past year," Notte said. "(And) Sterling Heights is still experiencing a strong housing market, with two residential developments in full swing."

Across Michigan, the census reflected a much different story.

After a decade of economic gloom, 15 of Michigan's 20 largest cities saw population losses. Detroit led the way falling by an astounding 237,493 people to 713,777, a 25 percent decline. Flint lost 10.7 percent of its residents, or 22,509 people.

While declines pushed Michigan to its first population drop in history, portions of the state saw continued growth — though at a much slower pace than 10 years earlier.

Kurt Metzger, a demographics expert who studied census estimates earlier this month that served as harbinger, said the gains in the new numbers reflect a period from 2000-05 when Macomb's economy was on much more solid footing.

The county's population grew by 4.6 percent from 2000-05 but then the annual gains quickly dropped off.

Until 2005-06, Macomb benefited from a significant gain in immigrant population compared to the rest of southeast Michigan,

according to Metzger, the founder of Data Driven Detroit. Albanians, Chaldeans, Vietnamese, Thai, Hmong and families from a variety of Arab cultures are among the ethnic groups that have made their way to Macomb County neighborhoods.

Migration is also a factor. Detroiters are moving into south Macomb, where foreclosures and falling prices have made housing much more affordable. And Oakland County residents are moving to north Macomb because of cheaper land and lower taxes, according to Metzger.

The state population figures revealed that, as expected, Michigan will lose one seat in the U.S. House, going from 15 members to 14.

But Macomb County may fare well when 2012 election districts are drawn for the state House and Senate.

The population shifts could be especially beneficial to Macomb in terms of its representation in the state House, where the county already has nine seats, with one district protruding into a portion of St. Clair County.

As for the county Board of Commissioners, south Macomb cities will likely see the census data rapidly escalate their declining influence within county government.

Four years ago, when the board had 26 members, Warren residents essentially had six commissioners representing them. The redistricting that took place last year, as required by the county charter's switch to a 13-member board, left Warren with two commissioner districts and part of a third.

The 2010 population numbers may leave Warren with just two commissioners.

In St. Clair Shores, the city had three commissioners in the 1990s and two throughout the past decade. That was cut to one commissioner under the reduced board in 2010.

The city's shrinking population will probably result in the Shores sharing a commissioner with a portion of a neighboring community, perhaps Harrison Township.

Norb Franz contributed to this story.

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