

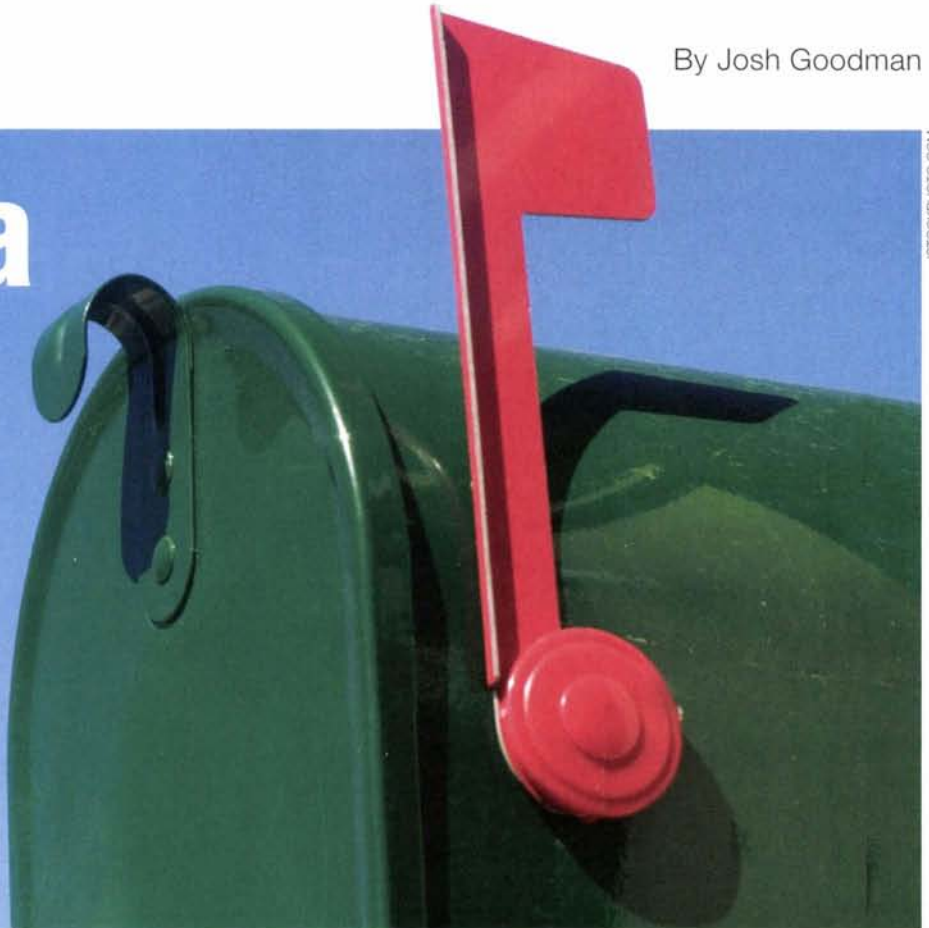
Politics + Policy

A look at the people, events and ideas that shape state and local government.

OBSERVER

By Josh Goodman

Livonia Mails It In



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Congratulations are in order for humble Livonia, Mich., which at least briefly is the envy of cities nationwide. The bedroom community near Detroit scored an 87 percent mail participation rate in the census this spring—the highest of any city of at least 50,000 people. Cities scrambled to boost their participation rates, knowing that state and federal representation and funding was at stake. So how did Livonia beat them?

The answer is by doing the same things that other cities did. Livonia coordinated its census efforts with schools, the media and business groups; it reached out to snowbirds, who might miss the arrival of census forms; it had census posters, signs and public service announcements. “We’re pretty proud of the work that was done,” says Dave Varga, Livonia’s director of administrative services, “and more proud of the response of the community.”

But Varga, who oversaw the efforts, also says the city spent next to no money on census outreach. He spent minutes, not hours, each week on the topic. The reason that Livonia scored so well, says Kurt Metzger, a Detroit-area demographer, isn’t what it did, but rather what it is.

Compared to much of southeast Michigan, Livonia is prosperous. Its unemployment rate is a fraction of the rate elsewhere in Wayne County. Crime is rare. Foreclosures and abandoned buildings aren’t epidemic problems. In Livonia, 90 percent of residents live in homes that they own.

In some ways, however, Livonia is stagnating. Its population is falling. Immigrants and young people have little reason to move to town. The city is more than 90 percent white, even though it’s only minutes from Detroit, which is more than 80 percent black. Livonia has a median age of 43—six years older than the national average.

The census struggles to get young people, renters, immigrants and the poor to respond to its questionnaire. Middle-class whites who have lived in the same place for a long time are easy. Livonia’s secret is that it has many people who are easy to reach; Detroit doesn’t. Its mail participation rate was 62 percent, far below the national average of 72 percent.

That disparity highlights an unfortunate truth. “The communities that can least afford to have a low response rate,” Metzger says, “are the ones that come in the worst.” **G**

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