



Editorial: What more of the same means for Detroit's decay



RON DZWONKOWSKI

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Detroit would keep shrinking, down to about 530,000 people, spread ever more thinly across the same 139.5 square miles but pockmarked by more than 110,000 empty homes and buildings.

Michigan's per capita income, in the top 10 nationally for decades, would be the lowest of the 50 states.

The population here would stagnate while the nation around it grew, diminishing Michigan's voice in Washington even further and likely reducing its share of federal funding for all manner of needs.

The state would keep aging, too -- so **health care** would account for an ever-larger slice of the economy. And employers seeking workers for jobs in the growing information, technology and knowledge-based sectors would keep looking elsewhere, in places where the populace is better educated.

If nothing changes, that's what changes.

If 2010 is just a point on a trend line, then the problems reflected in the census **data** released last week just get worse by 2020. The telltale numbers -- population loss, vacancies -- keep getting bigger. And the things that could be beacons for employers and investors -- growth and immigration -- remain weak, erratic and foreboding signals.

Albert Einstein classically defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Maybe that should be our interim state motto if all Michigan does between now and 2020 is stay the course.

Demographers and social scientists will tell you that there are too many variables to simply plot a line and make a good forecast based on a few sets of census numbers. Let's hope so, because grim results flow from such an unscientific exercise -- a "what if" based on the awful assumption that for reasons of politics, economics and human resistance, Michigan and particularly Detroit do nothing more in

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the next decade than repeat the last one.

Couldn't happen, could it? We may be difficult, but we're not collectively insane ... are we?

Changes would continue

If nothing changes, Michigan's population would continue a slow decline as the numbers of people leaving and dying continue to outpace new arrivals and births. The state population peaked at almost 10.1 million in 2005 and has been falling ever since; it's now about 9.9 million. That wouldn't be much of an issue except that the nation continues to grow -- from 282 million people in 2000 to about 310 million today.

That means Michigan's share of the U.S. population keeps slipping -- it fell to 3.2% from 3.5% in 2000 -- and so do its numbers of representatives in the U.S. House and electoral votes in presidential races. The 2010 census will cost us one of each. If the trend line doesn't change, at least one more will be gone after 2020, when the U.S. population is projected to be around 340 million.

This translates to Michigan mattering less in the national picture, getting less attention from candidates for the White House and losing clout in the never-ending battle for federal funds, billions of which are disbursed on the basis of population. This state has never gotten a dollar-for-dollar return on the money Michigan taxpayers send to Washington, and that situation will just get worse.

In per capita income, demographer Kurt Metzger of Data Driven Detroit says, an uninterrupted trend line would take Michigan from a ranking of 19th among states and the District of Columbia in 2000, when per capita income here was \$29,392 a year, to dead last in 2020, at \$44,873 in today's dollars. That same line would make the U.S. average \$59,736 by 2020.

If nothing changes, picture Detroit with another 25% population loss, taking it down to 535,000 people, not even among the 30 biggest cities in America. The proportion of single-parent households headed by women in the city -- an indicator of poverty -- would rise from about half to six in 10, or almost six times the national rate.

And if the number of vacant dwellings, which doubled from 2000-10, does that again, you're in the 150,000 range by 2020, assuming the city stays on its present pace of demolition. If nothing changes, Motown becomes Ghost Town.

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Across Michigan in 2020, the median age would be almost 42, four years past the national median, and 14% of the state population would be older than 65, two percentage points higher than the nation. These are not magnet numbers for employers -- but they might be for nursing home operators.

Statewide, if nothing changes, the share of college grads in the Michigan workforce inches up to about 26%. But nationally, it's closer to one-third. And the earnings gap between high school and college grads is probably up to around \$40,000 a year -- although the Michigan college grads are struggling with \$600 monthly loan payments because their tuition went up 7% every year.

Very critically for Michigan, if nothing changes between now and 2020, one of every three working-age adults in the state still won't be able to read well enough to hold down a job that can sustain a family.

You'd have to be insane

This overly simplistic scenario could be played out ad nauseam. But let's stop here and concede we have enough to picture a place where no sane person would want to be in 2020 -- and we haven't even mentioned what the roads might be like.

For the past decade, state leaders reacted to changes, often clumsily, as Detroit and Michigan were reshaped by economic forces and by people who moved around, moved away and generally grew older and poorer.

There's still time to shape the current decade so it ends better -- individually by improving ourselves, our education and our adaptability, and collectively by recognizing the 2010 census data not as an obituary but a call to change.

You don't have to be an Einstein to see it.

Ron Dzwonkowski is Associate Editor of the Free Press. Contact him: 313-222-6635 or rdzwonkowski@freepress.com



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If the current trend continues, Detroit's population

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