

Lansing-area leaders say Detroit's woes don't apply here



Written by

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Local government and business leaders are eager to inject last week's Census results into their own stories about efforts to reinvent the Lansing area's economy.

But those "Love Lansing" storytellers may struggle to be heard.

The biggest headline of the Census was not the 3.6 percent growth of the Lansing region but instead the staggering news that Detroit lost 25 percent of its population in the last decade.

The devastating drop in the Motor City captured national media attention and dominated the Census conversation about Michigan.

Local advocates say the bad news could drown out everything they've been trying to promote about Lansing.

"Detroit drives the narrative for the state," said Tim Schmitt, urban planner for the city of East Lansing.

"For better or worse, that is what grabs headlines. It's more difficult to get the message out or for any community to cut through that noise and say, 'Hey, we grew.' That's the story we have to tell."

Census data released last week confirmed what most people already knew: Michigan lost people between 2000 and 2010.

With a net loss of 54,000 residents - a 0.6 percent drop - Michigan was the only state in the country to shrink in population during the last decade.

The loss included an exodus of 237,000 people from Detroit.

Region growing

Though Lansing itself lost 4 percent of its population - dropping to just over

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114,000 people - the tri-county area grew to 464,000 residents, up from 447,000.

Clinton County led the state in population growth at 16 percent over the past decade and several local communities saw double-digit increases.

"Fundamentally our job is now easier because something very special happened to our region and our city," said Bob Trezise, head of the Lansing's economic development office.

"Although we had a minor loss in population, it's far less than before and I suspect most of that population decline was in first part of the decade. I think we have truly turned the corner."

Statewide analysts credit Lansing's relative stability to the same things that people like Trezise and Schmitt have been promoting for years: Michigan State University, state government and the region's growing financial and insurance industries.

"As we look in particular at regions that have colleges and universities, they tended to fare a little better and that's good news," said Michael Finney, CEO and president of the Michigan Economic Development Corp.

"Lansing is certainly one of the strong areas. We view Lansing as one of those key areas."

Empty housing

Still, Lansing has to overcome some very

real challenges that are more than just run-off negativity from the south, said Kurt Metzger, a census analyst and director of Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit data center.

Despite the region's net growth, census data also showed that Lansing saw a dramatic spike in the number of empty housing units - a sure sign of lingering economic distress.

And news stories about progress are usually followed by a trail of online comments from people who are caught in the region's 8.8 percent unemployment rate, a rate that has been consistently lower than the statewide rate.

"The fact that Lansing was able to hold on to the extent that it did gives them a legitimate point to make," Metzger said.

"I don't think it's just spin. Detroit is just one story, and certainly Detroit has the potential to lift up the state or hurt the state. But I think there is a lot that is

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ancillary to Detroit the state needs to address and overcome."

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