

May 2, 2011

<http://detroitnews.com/article/20110502/CENSUS/105020335>

Some city neighborhoods gain despite Detroit population pain

MIKE WILKINSON
/ *The Detroit News*

Detroit — The 2010 census numbers released last month confirmed an epic population loss for Detroit: Once the fifth largest in the country, the city is now No. 18, having lost 1 in 4 people in just 10 years.

But a Detroit News analysis of neighborhood-level areas shows the pain was not evenly spread. Some areas had steep declines into vast wastelands of burned-out homes and trash-strewn lots. But there are also pockets of vibrancy creating hope among city boosters and those bent on transforming Detroit.

The stark differences between neighborhoods could profoundly affect how the city reshapes itself as leaders draft a sweeping blueprint for the future. As they do, city leaders are identifying the assets to build around — strong ethnic communities, large employers, cultural and educational institutions, as well as pinpointing the areas of greatest decline and growth.

As they do so, they'll meet people like Angie Gaabo, who has chosen to raise her infant son, Joey, with her husband, Eric, in the Woodbridge neighborhood in Midtown. There, they know their neighbors, can walk and bike to stores and cultural activities, and enjoy a life full of vitality — all in an area that has shown some of the most widespread growth in the city.

"We love the neighborhood," she said, adding that nagging concerns about nearby blight and safety are overcome by the positives. "We have a great life."

Many others came to a different conclusion in the last decade, with thousands moving out of the city to seek work, better schools and safer neighborhoods. They left behind a city whose leaders will have to make tough choices about future funding. For neighborhoods where most of the homes remain and are occupied, improvements in street lighting might make sense. In others bereft of homes, people and activity, they may not.

"All of these conversations about neighborhoods are going to be very sensitive," said Marja Winters, deputy director of the city's Planning and Development Department that is overseeing the Detroit Works Project. "They're going to be tough."

To get the best understanding of the changes, the city should take stock at the neighborhood level, called "block-groups" by the U.S. Census Bureau, said Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit.

Census tracts typically comprise 3,000 to 4,000 people and can cross major roads, while block-groups are smaller and more closely match neighborhood boundaries.

For instance, where Gaabo lives in Woodbridge, the block-group population grew by 7 percent, reflecting a growing population that is borne out by an increase in the number of baby strollers rolling down Avery and Commonwealth streets.

If planners looked only at the area's census tract, they would have seen a 12 percent decline fueled by blighted areas that are far removed from the core of Woodbridge, hiding the obvious gains in the neighborhood.

"Block-groups are much more sensitive for identifying the dynamic levels of change in a community, change that can be masked by looking at larger geographies," Metzger said.

In search of 'purpose'

Decades ago, as the city mushroomed during a wave of industrial expansion, neighborhoods sprang up near bustling factories and areas dedicated to industrial activity. With so many of those buildings now shuttered, many neighborhoods lost their "economic purpose," said Lyke Thompson, director of Wayne State's urban studies center.

For those parts of the city, rebirth may be difficult, if not impossible, without a stabilizing force like an auto plant.

But in others, changes have helped a neighborhood shift focus. Southwest Detroit went from an area that sent workers to the Rouge and other plants to the center of the Hispanic community. One asset was replaced by another.

In Midtown, the attractions are more obvious: Wayne State University, its medical school, the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Henry Ford Health System. Combined, they employ tens of thousands and attract thousands more. Nearby neighborhoods have also added residents, businesses and vitality.

"If you look at the areas of Detroit that have thrived or at least held their own," Thompson said, "they have a clear and distinct purpose."

The area is hoping to take advantage of those assets: By 2015, Wayne State, Henry Ford Health and the Detroit Medical Center hope to attract 15,000 young, educated people to the city. New renters and homeowners can receive cash assistance.

Just a few miles northeast, along a short stretch off Seven Mile, just east of Woodward, the "distinct purpose" was once very clear: It was the epicenter of the region's Chaldean community, known for years as "Little Baghdad."

There are Chaldean bakeries and groceries and a Chaldean Catholic Church.

Yet during the 2000s, the area lost nearly half of its population — and an even greater proportion of Chaldeans, many of whom north to Macomb and Oakland counties.

"It's just desolated," said Martin Manna, executive director of the American Chaldean Chamber of Commerce, which has considered plans to put future waves of Chaldean immigrants into the neighborhood.

But now he said he fears the new arrivals will bypass what was once the first stepping stone to their assimilation: the neighborhood along Seven Mile. "They're skipping the city," he said. "We're seeing this completely."

Manna and others are hopeful, though, that they can turn a challenge into an opportunity. They've talked with state and local officials about help with immigrant housing to create a "village" that could revive the area. But he knows that even immigrants from a war-torn Iraq are reluctant to move into Detroit. They have concerns that residents everywhere have, including job opportunities, safety and schools.

"We'd love to see it work in the city of Detroit," Manna said. "But the challenges remain."

Investing in the city

As others in his east side neighborhood fled and moved into Warren, Roseville and other points north, Terrance Campbell paid \$8,500 for a tidy brick home on Young Street just west of Hayes. He installed new windows and a privacy fence and is admittedly cautious, fearful of strangers and the potential for break-ins. But he believes "crime is everywhere" and is pleased with his choice.

"This is me," said Campbell, 43. "The city is me."

Campbell said he was once one of the knuckleheads who used to do stupid stuff on Devil's Night, when youngsters with matches created infernos that brought infamy to the city. But now Campbell said he's made an investment in the city he once helped tear down. On a recent day, he hired a homeless man to clean up a pile of trash left on an abandoned lot across the street from his home.

"I'm just trying to make a change," Campbell said.

Nearby, Bob Gregory makes a similar effort. A retiree from Faygo, Gregory lives just east of Gratiot on Troester. Across the street from his tidy wood-frame house are two burned out homes. An empty lot sits beside his house.

But Gregory, 57, with his wife, Theresa, 54, a Detroit Public Schools teacher, have no intention of leaving the neighborhood that has been their home for more than two decades. Bob Gregory takes time to clean up lots near his home. He picks up the trash, picks weeds and tries to improve his world, blighted as it may appear to be.

"We could run and move to a nice neighborhood," he said. "But why run and go where you're not needed? I'm needed here."

mwilkinson@detroitnews.com

313-222-2563

© Copyright 2011 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.