

A population surge: Columbus, outlying areas post big gains

Saturday, March 17, 2001

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In the mayor's office at City Hall yesterday, cups of Diet Pepsi were raised in a toast to Columbus' booming population.

"This is a good day," an exuberant Mayor Michael B. Coleman said.

"Not only did we see growth, we saw double-digit growth. It proves what I've been saying -- that Columbus is the best place in Ohio to live, work and raise a family."

Hispanics, Asians and other minorities helped to fuel a population explosion in central Ohio during the 1990s, U.S. Census Bureau data released yesterday show.

Much of the area's growth occurred in cities such as Dublin and Hilliard in Franklin County, Pataskala in Licking County and Powell in Delaware County, where highly rated schools and the quality of life attracted families in droves.

The village of Powell, for example, added enough residents over the past 10 years to gain city status.

"Columbus is economically more diverse, somewhat recession-proof; and in the long run that makes us healthier," said Hazel Morrow-Jones, a professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University.

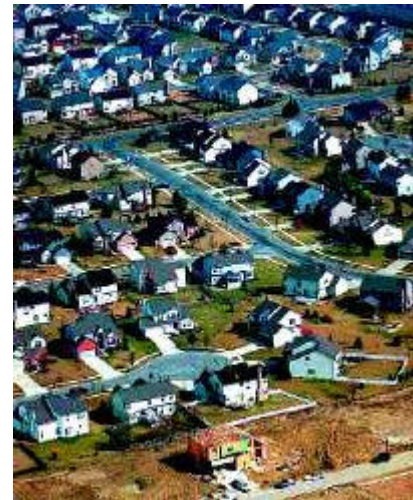
"We're very different from other cities in Ohio. We're a younger city . . . with more undeveloped land. I think we are fortunate and at a point in time where we can stop the problems."

Those problems -- a dearth of developable land and declining schools -- resulted in population losses during the decade in every other major Ohio city.

Cincinnati took the biggest hit, losing 9 percent of its population, or 32,755 residents. Cleveland lost 27,213 people, or 5.4 percent of its population.

Columbus remained the largest city in Ohio, gaining 78,560 people, a 12.4 percent increase.

"What this shows is the relative economic weakness of northeast Ohio and the strength of the Columbus region," said Tom Bier, an urban affairs professor at Cleveland State University. "People are going where the employment is strongest."



Craig Holman / Dispatch

Much of greater Columbus' growth occurred in areas such as the West Side, shown here, in an area north of I-70 and west of I-270 but in the Hilliard school district.

Not only did the region add more people, it added more minorities -- Hispanics and Asians drawn to the abundant jobs and economic vitality. That's an interesting twist for a city not especially known for its diversity, experts say.

While the Asian population increased 70 percent to 33,250 in Franklin County, the Hispanic population ballooned 163 percent to 24,279.

Paul Wu, president of Asian- American Community Services, said Asians are finding jobs in the region's colleges and technology and manufacturing sectors. A growing number are starting businesses.

Once settled, they bring their families, he said.

Such increasing diversity pleases Coleman.

"Diversity makes a community stronger," the mayor said.

"I'm glad to be part of a city that believes in inclusion and believes in diversity. I'm proud to be mayor during these times."

Though the minority population grew mostly in Columbus, overall population growth was highest in outlying suburbs with plenty of room for new homes.

For Kitty Green, census numbers only confirm what she has witnessed since she and her family moved to Dublin three years ago, helping to drive that city's population up 92 percent during the decade.

Her husband's job with a medical insurance company transferred the family here from Novi, Mich., in 1997. Dublin was an easy choice from the communities listed in a relocation package because of the good schools and high-quality neighborhoods, Mrs. Green said.

In three years, a new middle school has gone up in the neighborhood, along with a strip mall anchored by Kroger and homes all around her and her husband, Don, and their two children.

"We've got everything here -- the zoo, recreation centers, great parks," Mrs. Green said. "There was nothing like this where I'm from in Michigan."

Now the same job that brought the Greens from Michigan may take them back again. "My kids really love this place," Mrs. Green said. "We don't want to go back."

Officials say the Greens and others like them -- families following a job here -- are driving much of the population growth.

Before Tobi Gerber moved to central Ohio from southern California in 1993, she "couldn't have picked Columbus on a map if my life depended on it," she said.

The software company she works for transferred her to Columbus on a one-year assignment. When it ended, she decided to stay and got a job with a bank.

"It was much more cosmopolitan than I was expecting it to be," she said. "It is one of the cleanest cities; Downtown is spotless. It's much smaller than southern California, but it has everything I need."

Gerber initially rented an apartment in Dublin and, in 1998, bought a house in Hilliard -- one of the fastest-growing communities in central Ohio.

"At the time, our (subdivision) was right on the edge, with farms all around it," she said. Now, there are homes all around her.

"They're trying to make it a lot like Dublin," she said. "There are a lot of upscale homes going up."

Hilliard Mayor Timothy Ward called his city's 105 percent population increase "a mixed blessing."

"All these new residents are demanding new roads, new parks," he said. "The city did not set itself up for commercial development in order to have proper balanced growth."

Hilliard is largely a bedroom community, with homeowners carrying most of the tax burden to pay for schools and community services, Ward said.

"We have a wonderful opportunity to sell ourselves to the commercial development because we are a bedroom community with available workers.

"It's wonderful to be the mayor of a city where people want to move," said Ward, who took office last year.

"It gives you an idea that you've done things right."

But while some communities grew during the 1990s, others didn't. Landlocked cities such as Worthington, Upper Arlington and Whitehall lost population during the decade.

These so-called "first suburbs" are home to increasing numbers of empty-nesters -- couples whose children have grown up and moved out, OSU's Morrow-Jones said.

Additionally, "the people who are buying in Arlington have also sold in Arlington," she said. And many newcomers are childless couples, she said.

Worthington City Manager David Elder said the 5 percent population decline in his city is more than officials expected, but it wasn't a complete surprise.

"We've had some limited housing starts and were hoping that people are moving in with additional children," Elder said.

"As our community continues to age, it's conceivable the decline will continue."

Grandview Heights Mayor N. Colleen Sexton said the 315 people the city lost during the decade represent "a lot of graduating seniors."

She said the city is popular among empty-nesters. "I don't think it's anything we should be concerned about."

That Columbus has grown while other Ohio cities declined, Coleman said, is testament to its annexation policies, healthy economy and quality of life.

"We have to keep our momentum," he said.