

Southern Vermont population declines

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Half of Vermont's counties are shrinking.

According to U.S. Census estimates released today, the population of seven of the state's 14 counties declined in the year ending July 1, 2007.

Chittenden County, Vermont's most populous, grew the most with 727 new people. Overall, 476 more people lived in Vermont on July 1 than a year earlier, according to the Census estimates.

Bennington, Caledonia, Orange, Rutland, Washington, Windham and Windsor counties shrunk. The steepest numerical decline was in Windsor County, which lost an estimated 191 people over 12 months following a decade-long trend in the state's four southernmost counties.

The declines in Bennington, Rutland, Windham and Windsor counties are relatively small -- between 100 and 600 people per county since 2000 -- but development officials in the region say a shrinking population poses risks to the local economy. Attracting people to southern Vermont, however, is not simple.

Richard Heaps, publisher of the Vermont Economy Newsletter, said he is not sure why southern Vermont in particular is losing population, but believes the census data is generally accurate. "It isn't like a one-year fluke we're looking at. The population has really slowed down there," Heaps said.

Southern Vermont's population loss and anemic growth elsewhere in the state is not good news, Heaps said. The trend could erode tax bases and the labor force, harming communities' abilities to pay for government services.

Subtle effects

Periodically, the census releases estimates of various aspects of the nation's population. The data to be released today looks at population trends in each county in America. Generally, counties in the U.S. South and West grew fastest, while the most sluggish growth, or declines, occurred in the Northeast.

The population loss in southern Vermont is not readily apparent to a casual observer. Unlike other sections of the country where people are leaving, the southern end of the state has few if any neighborhoods with many abandoned houses. Downtown storefronts mostly are for the most part occupied by businesses, and small towns and cities bustle with traffic, pedestrians and commerce.

"A lot of towns across America would give their eye teeth to look like Brattleboro or Bellows Falls. They're beautiful," said Jim Matteau, executive director of

the Windham Regional Commission.

If you look closely, you can see signs of the slow exodus, Matteau said. "What you don't see when you look at the old downtowns is the upstairs in the downtown areas. They might be empty now. If those had offices or residences, those people would be spending money down on the street at noontime," he said.

Physical evidence of the southern Vermont population decline is also partly masked by vacation homes. "There is a feeling of increase there because of the second-home industry, which until recently went through a big boom period," Heaps said. Part-time residents in second homes do not count in the census.

Owners of those second homes encourage some types of businesses to locate in southern Vermont. Heaps offered the Rutland Home Depot on U.S. 4 as an example.

State and local economic directors can try to attract people and jobs to Vermont, but there's no easy answer on how to do that anymore, Matteau said. "Chasing smokestacks isn't it anymore. Chasing great big companies isn't the answer," he said. "A lot of companies relocate to where the boss wants to be."

In Rutland, Tom Macaulay of the Rutland Redevelopment Authority said the census data are probably a blip. His impression is Rutland County's population remains stable. Still, he echoes the concerns of Gov. Jim Douglas that the entire state is losing younger residents.

The new census data did not get into does not offer details of which age groups are migrating to and from Vermont.

"We're going to have to find more ways to retain our youth," Macaulay said. His organization is trying a variety of ways to attract people in jobs, including building an economic base on environmentally friendly businesses, establishing a countywide fiber-optic network and lobbying for affordable housing.

The new census data are estimates, as opposed to the actual head counts conducted once a decade. The next count is scheduled for 2010. Will Sawyer, the lead agency coordinator for the Vermont State Data Center, an arm of the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies, said it is still unclear whether the new numbers reflect a definite trend.

The census estimates for counties are more accurate than town-by-town figures, Sawyer said. However, Sawyer said he discourages year-to-year comparisons for people looking for trends. The 2010 census will reveal for sure whether the estimates released now are accurate, Sawyer said.

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