

Sussex tops among rural counties losing population



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By ROB JENNINGS

rjennings@njherald.com

Sussex County lost population at a higher rate than any other county in New Jersey during the three-year period ending Dec. 31, according to a new report based on U.S. Census statistics.

Warren County's population decreased at the third-highest rate, said the report by Trenton-based New Jersey Future. It was posted on the organization's website Tuesday.

Prepared by research director Tim Evans, the report offered further evidence of the slowing or outright decline of "sprawl" -- the post-World War II development phenomenon of people relocating from cities to the country.

Only one of the six counties with a population loss, Camden, was described in the report as "primarily urbanized." By contrast, the six fastest-growing counties included five with the most development -- Hudson, Middlesex, Union, Essex, Bergen and Middlesex -- in New Jersey.

Evans wrote that the population shift away from predominantly rural counties "reflects a dramatic reversal of New Jersey's development pattern of the last 50-plus years."

Sussex County declined from 151,431 people in 2008 to 148,517 in 2011, a 1.92 percent decrease -- the largest percentage loss. Warren County had the third biggest drop, slipping from 109,897 in 2008 to 108,339 in 2011 -- a 1.42 percent decrease.

In addition to Camden, the other three population losers were Monmouth, Hunterdon and Salem counties.

Hudson County's population surged from 592,111 in 2008 to 641,224 in 2011, an 8.3 percent increase making it by far the state's fastest-growing. Middlesex, with a 3.7 percent increase, was second.

Evans, in his report, cites several likely contributing factors.

"The flight to the 'exurbs' may be a thing of the past, a casualty of four years of economic stagnation, housing market collapse, \$4 per gallon gasoline and 'millenials' in search of 'walkable urbanism,'" Evans said.

Walkable urbanism, for those not in the know, refers to locations where a car is not needed. Studies have shown a strong preference for walkable urbanism among millenials, or those in their 20s.

The exurbs refer to communities farther removed from cities than traditional suburbs.

Evans, in an interview with the New Jersey Herald on Friday, said, "The housing market collapse caused everyone to re-evaluate the wisdom of living far away."

Founded in 1987, New Jersey Future is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes policies aimed at reducing sprawl and promoting community redevelopment, according to its website. Its motto is "Working for Smart Growth: More Livable Places and Open Spaces."

Vernon Township Mayor Victor Marotta, asked about the report's findings, said, "There's no question that population numbers are trending down for Sussex County."

"One can speculate as to the why and the where of it," Marotta said.

"There are those who will say it's the Highlands Act," Marotta said, referring to a controversial 2004 state law limiting rural development in parts of Sussex County and elsewhere.

Marotta added that while property taxes were once generally much higher in municipalities closer to New York City, taxes in some rural communities are now on a par with places in Bergen and Essex.

What does all of this mean, potentially, for Sussex County?

Sussex County Administrator John Eskilson said that "slowing growth in the overall tax base certainly is problematic for municipal governments and, over the long haul, for county government."

"If your population isn't growing, you're not building houses. You're not building your commercial base if you don't have that growth," Eskilson said.

The evolution of Vernon, the most populated of Sussex County's 24 municipalities, reflects both the rise of sprawl and the emerging slowdown shown in the New Jersey Future report.

In 1960, Vernon had only 2,155 residents, according to a demographic study prepared for the Vernon school district in January 2011.

By 1980, the population had soared to 16,302. Vernon grew to 21,211 residents by 1990 and 24,686 by 2000.

From there, the surge ended. Marotta said that Vernon currently has around 24,000 residents.

However, the percentage of Vernon families with young children has significantly declined, as reflected in student enrollment numbers. A total of 5,323 children were enrolled in the K-12 district during the 2004-05 school year, the January 2011 report found.

By 2010-11, enrollment had decreased to 4,041 -- promoting discussion, which remains ongoing, about potentially closing a school building.

Marotta, in discussing his 2012 municipal budget earlier this year, said that the era of young couples relocating from places such as Bergen to Vernon had ended.

"One positive side is the days of having to build a new school as population explodes are gone," Marotta said.

"The downside is, as the population numbers decline, the existing market for housing also declines. The loss of assessed value can, if not managed properly, become a real drain on the families remaining in the community," Marotta said.

Overall, is the population shift a good or a bad thing?

Ultimately, it depends on one's perspective.

"Vernon Township and Sussex County will always be a beautiful, open, natural area and environment," Marotta said.

"I believe that, as the areas to the east of us continue to increase in population density, there are those who will pay a premium -- and gladly pay a premium -- to live in a park-like setting such as Vernon and Sussex County," Marotta said.