

Will County a bright spot amid dismal census figures



New townhomes are under construction near 187th and Wolf Road in Mokena, part of the Old Mill Pond development, which also includes Fox's Restaurant and retail shops. (Susan DeMar Lafferty / Daily Southtown)

By **Susan DeMar Lafferty** · **Contact Reporter**

Daily Southtown

MARCH 25, 2016, 5:54 PM

It was a new job that brought the Renaud family from Pennsylvania to Will County last year.

Kelly Renaud said they looked all around the area before settling in [Frankfort](#). They wanted to be near her husband's [Tinley Park](#) office and they liked the small town atmosphere.

"We almost moved to California. I'm glad we came here. I really like it here," Renaud said.

Jobs are one of the main reasons folks are moving to Will County, according to local officials.

Good schools, affordable homes, relatively low taxes, great municipalities, safety and quality of life also are reasons they cited for Will County's population increase of 1,642 in the one year period from July

2014 to July 2015.

"It all adds up to Will County being a decent place to live," said County Executive Larry Walsh, a lifelong resident. "We have a lot of good things going for us, but first and foremost it is because of the jobs that have been created here. That stands out more than anything else. I'm not at all surprised by the increase. I wouldn't be surprised if we topped 700,000." .

Will County stood out as one of the bright spots in a region where its population has declined overall, with steady growth from 678,910 in July 2010 to 687,263 in July 2015, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Chicago's metropolitan area – defined by the US Census Bureau as Chicago, its surrounding counties, and those extending into Indiana and Wisconsin – showed the greatest loss of any metropolitan area in the country, losing 6,263 residents in the last year.

According to census figures for July, 2015, Cook County declined by 10,488 people, to 5,238,216. Lake County lost 239 and DuPage, 33. Besides Will County, others on the plus side were Kane County, with an increase of 3,346, Kendall County, up 1,539, and [McHenry](#), 368.

Over the five-year period from 2010-2015, Cook showed steady increases from 5,199,303 in 2010 to 5,248,704 in 2014, until 2015, when it dropped. Lake and McHenry Counties fluctuated over the years, while Will, Kane and Kendall showed steady growth.

Lake County, Indiana was the only one in the region with a consistent population decline over the last five years.

The state's population decline continued. After dropping by 7,391 in 2014, it nearly tripled that in 2015, losing 22,194.

But a loss of 10,000 out of 5 million people in Cook County, "is not like the sky is falling," said Ed Paesel, director of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association.

"The loss of 10,000 people is not headline news," he said, adding that, except for a few, the south suburbs are generally stable or growing.

People continue to migrate from Cook to Will County, and while growth has continued in Will County, it's at a slower, more manageable rate than in years prior to the recession, said Curt Paddock, director of the county's Land Use and Development Department.

Projections by the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) (CMAP) show Will County's population to

be 1 million by 2040, and that is still on target, he said.

Like Renaud, people like the less dense, semi-rural feel of Will County's towns, and its proximity to four interstates, which provides access to jobs, he said.

There were 10,000 jobs created in Will County in the past year – "better-paying jobs," - like Amazon – which just announced it was adding 500 jobs to the 1,000 it opened with last fall at its new Joliet fulfillment center, and people are moving closer to their jobs, said John Greuling, president and CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development.

But Greuling also is troubled that the region as a whole is losing its population.

"No one has robust population growth. None of us are gaining what we should be for our future," he said. Will County might have seen more growth if it provided better public transportation, he said.

According to CMAP, the census numbers represent the continuation of a trend.

Since 2010, population growth in the region has lagged that of its peers, with the region ranking 45th among metro areas with 1 million or more residents, according to Liz Schuh, CMAP's principal policy analyst.

"This slower population growth matches slower economic growth. The region's slower recovery from the recession, as well as the state's broader fiscal condition, can negatively affect population growth," she said in an email.

To improve the region's economic position, CMAP points to initiatives also cited by local officials, such regional collaboration on economic development, workforce training, business development, and infrastructure investment.

All of those are issues the SSMMA has been working on, said Reggie Greenwood, the organization's economic development director.

While the south suburbs have attracted four new super Wal-Marts in Lansing, Homewood, Richton Park, and Olympia Fields, a new Meijers in Flossmoor, an intermodal facility in Harvey, and an expanded manufacturing plant in Sauk Village, taxes are an "impediment," he said, citing their close proximity to Indiana and Will County.

"It's a challenge, but we're in the ball game," Greenwood said. He also has partnered with area high schools and junior colleges to develop a trained workforce.

Whether the declining population in the metropolitan region is a continuing trend depends on whether

the state's and region's economic issues can be addressed – chief of which is education, Paesel said.

Students who feel it is "too risky" to enroll in an Illinois college or university will go out of state and won't come back – "that is a critical issue," he said.

Cook County will never see exploding population because it is built out, Paesel said, but communities need to provide options – to attract young families as well as Baby Boomers.

Despite the region's woes, Paesel said, "There are so many good things going on in our communities that you never hear about."

slafferty@tribpub.com

Marwa Eltagouri of the Chicago Tribune also contributed.

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