

Aurora in 2018: With population no longer booming, city looks to downtown for future growth

 chicagotribune.com/suburbs/aurora-beacon-news/news/ct-abn-changing-aurora-population-st-0708-story.html

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 It was the end of the railroad line, her father told her. A far-off suburb, she assumed.

Other than that, Carole Arliskas didn't know much about Aurora before she and her husband arrived around 1970 to run a Pontiac car dealership they'd bought on Lake Street. The city's fewer than 75,000 residents made up what seemed to her a homogeneous small town.

Over the coming decades, as Arliskas went on to work in private business and then lead several community organizations, Aurora's population more than doubled and the Hispanic and Asian populations grew.

That explosive growth is part of Aurora's evolution from a mid-size, industrial river town to Illinois' second-largest city today with more than 200,000 residents. And the city's changing demographics in recent decades have helped drive that evolution and will set the agenda for what lies ahead.

Today, the city's once-booming growth has slowed to a crawl, census estimates show. Officials say there is room for growth, but that growth will look different.

There's little room for more subdivisions to sprout across the community as they did in the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead, the focus will be on downtown and the city's train line, building up, not out, said Stephane Phifer, a longtime Aurora city planner who now works with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

The river, train line and tollway access, all related to transportation, are some of the city's best assets, she said.

"Aurora's just very on-trend with the fact that they're looking at walkable communities, urban communities," she said.

'New frontier'

After years of steady growth, Aurora's population skyrocketed in the 1990s and 2000s. In two decades, the city nearly doubled the 99,500 residents who lived there in 1990, census figures show.

Much of the growth was tied to construction of new homes, said Phifer.

As Aurora added land to its borders, developers swooped in and offered single-family homes. The new homes drew residents from the city's older, more urban neighborhoods, leaving room there for the fast-growing Hispanic population, Phifer said.

School districts scrambled to accommodate rising enrollments. In 2003, Aurora officially surpassed Rockford as the state's second-largest city, a feather in Aurora's cap that it still has today.

The city's status as Illinois' second largest brings with it a prestige that can attract attention from state and federal governments and from businesses, Deputy Mayor Chuck Nelson said. Its size brings challenges such as making sure there is adequate housing and updated transportation. It also helps bring jobs and additional people to the area. That, in turn, can bring additional money to the city's school systems, he said.

As the 1990s ended, the city had grown to nearly 143,000 people, and it would continue to grow to nearly 198,000 by 2010, census data show.

But Aurora's boom is over, data suggests. By 2016 — the most recent year for which the census' American Community Survey figures are available — the city's population was about 200,900, a growth rate slower than in any decade since at least the 1970s.

Construction hit the city limits shortly before the 2008 recession, Phifer said. In addition to the stagnating national economy, there was little open space left for the city to continue building.

"It's really more of a stabilization of the market, if anything," she said.

By then, Arliskas said, Aurora's growth and diversity had become apparent. Empty buildings began to fill, and the Paramount Theatre had become a draw to, what seems to her, a thriving downtown. Though it's certainly not perfect — downtown could use more restaurants, and she speculated high taxes are contributing to the city's slowing growth — Aurora has changed for the better since she arrived in the 1970s, Arliskas said.

"Aurora was, and maybe mentally still is, a big small town," she said.

As growth slows, the city has an opportunity to focus on redevelopment of downtown and working with the city's neighborhoods, Nelson said. Downtown is the "new frontier" for development, he said.

Interest is building in downtown Aurora, Nelson said. The area is developing its own identity, largely centered around the arts.

The city will also have to adapt to young renters who are not looking to tie themselves to a mortgage, Nelson said. Aurora has sought to meet that need through a development near the city's Far East Side train station with homes both for sale and for rent, he said.

Demographic shifts

The demographic trends in Aurora mirror what analysts at CMAP have seen. Growth has slowed across the agency's working area. Hispanic populations aren't growing as quickly, and more people are arriving from Asian countries, said Aseal Tineh, a policy analyst at the agency.

The Rev. Dan Haas, a lifelong resident and community activist, graduated from East Aurora High School in 1970 with mostly white and black students, he recalled. Hispanic students seemed few and far between.

At that time, the city's bustling manufacturing companies needed workers, he said. Aurora would soon annex what is now the city's Far East Side in DuPage County, leaving room for physical growth.

One of those newcomers was Ricky Rodgers, who arrived in Aurora in 1983 from Missouri looking for a job that didn't involve farming. At that time, much of the city remained cornfields and the East Side housed several predominantly black communities, he recalled. Black-owned businesses dominated East New York Street, said Rodgers, now executive director of the African American Men of Unity mentoring program.

Rodgers recalled black residents moving into Aurora as housing projects in Chicago were torn down in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Black residents were also leaving Aurora, searching for a better education system and fleeing violence, he said. By the mid-2000s, the black neighborhoods and businesses on the East Side had started to dwindle, he said.

Pastor Edwin Ruiz and his family arrived in Aurora in 1990 to lead the Iglesia Carismatica Jesucristo es la Verdad. Early in their time in Aurora, his wife and daughter recalled seeing bullet holes in the walls of the building that then housed the congregation.

"They used to tell us that this, Aurora, wasn't a good place to be," said Ruiz's wife, Teresita. "That was so hard. People were such in the negative back then because of the environment. The gangs, the drugs, the prostitution."

The rise in gang violence during the 1990s was not unique to Aurora, but it was a problem that took years of combined police and community efforts to curb.

From 2000 to 2010, the city's demographics continued to shift. The percentage of white residents dropped from 68 to 60 percent; the black population remained about 11 percent and the percentage of Asians grew from 3 to nearly 7 percent, the data show.

Aurora's Hispanic population grew over the decade from 33 percent to 41 percent.

By 2016, about 57 percent of the city was white, 10 percent was black and nearly 8 percent was Asian, the figures show. Nearly 43 percent of residents were Hispanic.

The growing Hispanic population has brought new restaurants and stores, and a refugee services agency has resettled people in Aurora from across the world, Haas said. Meanwhile, much of the city's growing East Indian population moved into developments on the Far East Side, Phifer said.

Though the city has changed since Nelson was first elected alderman 25 years ago, it has remained a microcosm of the country, he said.

"We are very proud of our diversity, and we look at our diversity as a very strong asset to our community," he said. "And, in fact, it's something that I think attracts people to our community."

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series exploring Aurora's transformation from a mid-size industrial town into the large, diverse community it is today.

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