

The 1990 census addresses housing concerns

Beginning Sunday, April 1, 1990, in all 50 states of the United States and in its possessions, the 21st census of the population will be taken. And with it will be questions on housing, asked since 1940, so that we will have an accurate data base for both people and their housing conditions upon which to base our requirements for the present and to better project what our needs for the future will be.

The purpose of this comprehensive and costly count of the populace is detailed in the US Constitution, Article 1, Section 2 wherein it states that "Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers."

The Revolutionary War incurred a sizable debt, and in order to fairly distribute this burden over the entire country, it was felt that an accurate amount of the population would distribute this obligation equally among all of the people. But representative government also meant that all the people should be counted so that their representatives to Congress would fairly be apportioned among the citizens.

If the census were done only for tax purposes, the founding fathers felt that the numbers would be undercounted; and if done to determine how many representatives should come from the states, they felt that the numbers would be overcounted. With these two objectives to counterbalance one another, it was felt that an accurate count would be better determined.

Based upon that first count in 1790 which came up with a figure of 3.9 million, the original number of 65 representatives in the House increased to 106. This meant that each House member represented 37,000 residents. As time went on and the population grew, the membership of the House increased to its present size of 435 in 1911, at which time each of these representatives was accountable to more than 211,000 constituents.

With the 1990 count expected to record 250

million people, the number of constituents represented by each of the 435 members of the House will be 575,000 people. Even with modern technology that allows better communications between House of Representatives members in Washington and their constituents, one can seriously question if it is possible for them to adequately do the job, and whether the times and numbers dictate a further increase in the size of that body.

Counting for the purpose of taxation, the other objective of the census as mandated by the Constitution, was never used. Other means have effectively been used to ensure that taxpayers fulfill their obligations.

The first census conducted in 1790 consisted of only six questions and was carried out by US Marshals, a job for which they had responsibility until 1870. Since that time, the Census Bureau, part of the Department of Commerce, has carried out this assignment.

At one time done from horseback but now conducted through the mail, the process is an all-encompassing one that seeks to count all people both here and outside the country, and then assign locations for them. For example, institutional populations, such as those found in Cranston; military, such as those in Newport; and college students, whether in dormitories or off-campus housing, are considered residents of the communities in which they are housed. In the case of Providence, this means that more than 10,000 college students, usually here on a relatively short-term basis, are considered residents of the city.

Also, for the first time, the Census Bureau will make an attempt to count the homeless. Enumerators will check housing shelters on one night in March, before midnight, to collect numbers; then after midnight, these enumerators are expected to check under bridges, in alleys and other such places where the homeless may be found to ask questions of these people.

Before April 1, that more than 100 million

households in the country will have received the short form of seven population and seven housing questions. An additional 17 percent of these households will also have received the sample or long form of 26 additional population questions and 17 additional housing questions.

From these mailed-in forms and subsequent follow-ups of persons who did not answer, the Bureau must have numbers to report by the end of the year to President Bush. He, in turn, passes to the Congress the numbers for each state and the number of representatives to which each is entitled. And then the fun begins.

New York, for example, lost five representatives after the 1980 count and stands to lose three more after the 1990 count. California, on the other hand, gained five seats after the 1980 count and will likely gain six more after 1990.

These shifts in number of state representatives also portend a shift in number of representatives in regions throughout the country. Of the approximately 24 million Americans that will be added to the country's population, 87 percent of that growth is currently from the South and the West: 47 percent from the south and 40 percent from the West.

Such regional and state shifts of population and representative will ultimately have an impact on the political power structure of the nation. And the slowly increasing Northeast, accounting for only 7.5 percent of the nation's growth, will be a loser in this contest for representative political power.

Whether we consider the census from the national, state or local level, all of us need to watch and study closely the results of the 21st census. The numbers will help determine the shifting of political power between regions, states and communities, and all of us will be touched by it. □

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