

# Only in RI: housing booms, population sags, shifts

House sales in the state are at an all-time high. Some towns have imposed housing impact fees and caps on building permits to slow population growth that exceeds 20 percent. Communities are trying to save open space because 26,000 acres of raw land has gone into new development over the last 20 years. And all of this taking place in one of only two states to have lost population in the last seven years!

A strong economy, low mortgage rates, consumer confidence, desire to leave cities and live near the water or in rural areas and still sprawl over the land help explain these events, but how does one explain a population loss each year for the last seven years, the only state to claim this dubious distinction?

When Allied Signal announces job cuts so now fewer than 100 will be employed from a high of 1,300; when employment at Electric Boat has gone from a peak of 5,500 to the current 1,300; and when Hasbro, Monet and other firms announce downsizing and a shifting of jobs to other states and countries, all of this has an impact on population growth.

Yet even with population decline of 1.6 percent from 1990 to 1997, largest drop in the nation, within the state there have been increases in population, especially in those

communities in the southern and western parts of the state, essentially at the expense of the state's eight cities, all of which lost population.

Building on these population estimates from the U.S. Census and using estimates of their own, state planners have made projections of population changes that will likely take place within the state over the next decade.

Using the actual count of population for 1990 and their own population estimates done five years after each census, state planners project our population will increase to 1,031,245 by the year 2010, an increase of nearly 28,000. But this increase will not affect all communities in the same manner.

Water-facing communities in the south, a Middletown still picking up Newport leavers and some rural and suburban communities in the north and west will have numerical increases of 2,500 to 5,000. But it is the seven cities and Barrington that catch our attention because of projected loss of population by the year 2010. To corroborate these trends, the Census Bureau claims that from 1990 to 1996 all of the eight cities in the state lost a total of 23,395, with individual losses ranging from a 1.1 percent in Warwick to a 13.9 percent in Newport.

These census-generated numbers have raised controversies, especially in Providence whose number loss from 1990 to 1996 was 8,170, a 5.1 percent decline. As the mayor has rightly claimed, how can population go down when school population has increased by 18 percent over the past six years to its current 26,147 student enrollment.

The Providence case illustrates the difficulty of counting inner city residents, many of whom are new arrivals, and the reason the Census Bureau wants to use statistical sampling, favored by Democrats, rather than

an actual head count, favored by Republicans. Currently before the U. S. Supreme Court on which method will be used, this matter will be decided by the court in the spring.

Only one city, Cranston, will increase population but that is projected at only 418, or just .6 percent. Barrington lost population in the 1980 and 1990 censuses, primarily a result of larger, young families getting older and leaving the nest.

In summary, the whole state is projected to grow by only 2.8 percent, well below a national figure approximately seven times that, but not unusual for a state that, with three exceptions since 1790, has grown at less than the national average.

The nine towns of Washington County will continue to lead the state with an 18 percent growth rate, with Charlestown, Narragansett and Richmond exceeding 30 percent. A few small communities in the western part of the state, including Foster and Glocester, will have

growth rates exceeding 20 percent.

But we are not alone: Slow growth is now the norm in New England and the Northeast, while the South and West continue to lead the nation in population growth. And in this state we are also getting older, with median age (one-half above and one-half below) now 36.2, up from 34 in 1990.

Is slow growth bad? Not if one considers the longer time, as compared with rapidly growing states and demands made by fast growing populations, that we have to tackle social and environmental problems. But at the same time we need to recognize that increasing jobs and strengthening the economy which lead to population growth are what allow us to continue to have and maintain a quality of life that many feel is one of the best in the nation. To balance these social, environmental and economic demands is the challenge.

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