



Census shows Peoria adds population

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Journal Star

Posted Feb 15, 2011 @ 04:06 PM

Last update Feb 15, 2011 @ 09:37 PM



PEORIA — For the first time since the 1970 census, the city's population saw an increase in the federal government's decennial count, even though Peoria dropped from Illinois' fifth largest city to its seventh.

The population numbers, released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Tuesday, show Peoria at 115,007 people, up 1.8 percent - or 2,071 more people - than 112,936 who were accounted for in 2000.

It marked the first time since the devastating economic recession of the 1980s that Peoria saw an increase in the overall 10-year census count.

"I'm very pleased to see we've turned that trend line around," said at-large City Councilman Ryan Spain, chairman of the city's committee aimed at getting a complete count of Peoria residents.

The city's racial demographics also changed in the past 10 years, as the city grew more diverse. According to the census numbers, the percentage of blacks increased to 27 percent in 2010, up from 24.8 percent in 2000. The city's Hispanic population also increased, up to 4.9 percent in 2010 from 2.5 percent in 2000. Also increasing was the city's Asian population, from 2.3 percent in 2000 to 4.6 percent in 2010.

Peoria's white population saw a decline during the past 10 years, dropping from 69.3 percent of the overall population in 2000 to 62.4 percent in 2010. In 1990, the city's white population made up 76.5 percent of the city.

Ross Black, assistant director of the Planning and Growth Management Department, said it's too early to delve into what the details of the 2010 census might mean for the city, although he said the overall population increase indicates for the first time, an upswing in people moving into Peoria.

The city is scheduled to hold a news conference at 10 a.m. Friday at City Hall to further discuss the data.

"There is an awful lot of data that needs to be released before we can get a clear picture of the population of Peoria," Black said.

He said the city is awaiting housing and economic data before it can get a more complete analysis of changes in the city.

"The data released today, while it's certainly helpful, it's a very broad brush stroke as what is happening in the community," Black said. "All the data that adds to the richness the census provides has not been released yet."

Black acknowledged that the city's growth cell strategy, aimed at spurring new housing developments on the city's northern sections since the 1990s, assisted the growth.

Robert Scott, a professor of economics at Bradley University, was more specific - the growth cells were the reason the city avoided another decline.

"These growth cells are doing what they should be doing for the city," Scott said.

The challenge, both Scott and Spain said, is for city leaders to develop strategies aimed at attracting residents back into the older areas of Peoria if the city is to sustain its census growth momentum in 2021.

Spain said the Warehouse District, a revitalization project of older buildings south of Downtown into apartment buildings, could attract 4,000 to 5,000 new residents within the next 10 years.

"If we can invest in the older neighborhoods and bring families back and provide an ability to provide new construction activities, we'll be poised to take the modest growth in this census and really ramp up for a much larger growth for 2020," he said.

Aside from the growth figure, Peoria experienced a fall of sorts and appears to be long removed as the official "second city" of Illinois. That title belongs to Aurora, a suburban Chicago city fueled by a 38.4 percent growth since 2000, which jumped over Rockford in population totals.

Peoria dropped behind Springfield and Joliet in population, from ranking as No. 5 in 2000 to No. 7 in 2010. Joliet, thanks to explosive growth over the past 10 years, leapfrogged from the seventh largest Illinois city to No. 4.

"As Peorians, we are fierce competitors and many of us will feel that sentiment," Spain said about the decline. "But Peoria, by far, is still the second largest metropolitan area in the state. Even though there are communities like Rockford and Springfield ahead of us in population count, Peoria as an economic center is still the major area outside of Chicago."

Spain also said the figures shouldn't reflect poorly on how much Peoria gained during the housing boom during the middle part of the 2000s.

Scott said the city sustained itself well during the recession, a fact that probably played a role in the 10-year growth number.

"The area is stronger than people think," he said. "Peoria is growing and we're adding to a population and adding to opportunities for those who live and work here."

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