

'Challenging decade' weighs on Jefferson

Population ranks 2nd in state

By Richard Rainey

East Jefferson bureau

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After four major hurricanes, a recession, a massive oil spill and the constant rise in the costs of living, Jefferson Parish's dip in population during the last decade came as little surprise.

"It's been a challenging decade," Councilman Chris Roberts said Thursday.

The U.S. Census Bureau released 2010 statistics Thursday that showed Jefferson, with 432,552 residents, is second in population statewide to East Baton Rouge Parish. That tally is almost 23,000 people fewer than the number counted in Jefferson during the 2000 census.

Council Chairman Tom Capella said the numbers were evidence that Jefferson residents, for the most part, were willing to weather trying times.

"I'm very proud of our parish where we worked so hard to get back," Capella said. "People love our parish, they love being here and we, as parish leaders, are going to try to do everything to make it better."

Although the numbers are about 11,000 people fewer than the 2009 census population estimate, Roberts said the count sounded accurate and would likely remain unchallenged.

"We're pretty close to where our estimates were," he said.

Roberts said he sees the loss of residents starting to reverse, especially with Mayor Mitch Landrieu's new administration in neighboring New Orleans getting favorable ratings.

"I think the new administration has given a lot of people a lot of hope," he said, "and I think Jefferson Parish will (benefit) off of that."

Councilwoman Diane Hollis said Thursday she couldn't comment because she hadn't had a chance to review the new statistics.

Parish President John Young and council members Elton Lagasse, Byron Lee, Louis Congemi and Cynthia Lee-Sheng didn't return messages left seeking comment.

Tammany swells, but not because of Katrina

Growth on the march long before 2005 storm, data show

By Jeff Adelson

St. Tammany bureau

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St. Tammany was the fastest-growing parish in the New Orleans area in the past 10 years, a distinction that likely will come as no surprise to those who have charted the steady march of residents to the north shore.

But while many point to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as a catalyst for the north shore's growth, U.S. Census Bureau data released Thursday show the storm had little, if any, effect on the parish's long-term trajectory.

Officials said that rather than jump-start the parish's growth, the population increase after Katrina soon dissipated, and the permanent increase caused by the storm may have been tempered by the slump in the national economy that followed.

"We've had strong steady growth since before 2000," said Sidney Fontenot, director of planning for St. Tammany Parish. "We've had this strong growth really since the 1960s."

St. Tammany's population jumped 22 percent in the past decade, breaking the region's predominant trend of depopulation with a growth rate twice as fast as its nearest competitor, St. Charles Parish. The parish now has about 233,740 residents, or 42,472 more than it did in 2000, according to the Census Bureau.

While those numbers seem to prop up the conventional wisdom that St. Tammany became a home for south shore residents displaced by the storm, these numbers hide a more complicated story of steady growth broken only temporarily by the influx of people seeking refuge from the storm's damage.

St. Tammany might have had as many as 300,000 residents immediately after Katrina, but many of those south shore residents returned home or left the area altogether soon afterward, Fontenot said. And many of those who did stay had likely considered a move to the north shore

anyway and found the storm just sped up their plans, he said.

"What appeared to be our permanent population is relatively close to the historical growth of the parish," he said.

Between 2000 and July 2005, St. Tammany Parish grew at a rate of about 13 percent. In the next five years, that growth rate would drop by almost half, to about 7 percent.

That drop is largely because of the overall economic climate, Fontenot said, noting that building permits dropped precipitously in 2007 as the global financial crisis, largely sparked by a bursting real estate bubble, heated up.

And were it not for the collapse of the national real estate market, St. Tammany likely would have been significantly more crowded. Some estimates had the parish heading toward a total of 265,000 residents by 2013, Fontenot said.

Parish officials expected the 2010 population to come in somewhere around 235,000 people, parish spokeswoman Suzanne Parsons Stymiest said. The parish government had considered appealing the total population numbers if they came in well below expectations, a situation that could hurt the parish when it sought federal money. However, Parish President Kevin Davis said Thursday that such a move would not be necessary.

"Given the slow economy, I was pleased to see St. Tammany continue to grow at a steady pace," Davis said. "I do believe that the growth is probably slightly higher than indicated, but I do not believe that the price of asking for a recount will provide a high enough cost-benefit ratio to our citizens to warrant the cost."

Dawn Sharpe-Brackett, CEO of the East St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce, said the parish's growth rate was a good sign, and its concrete effects could be seen by the growth of the area's economy.

"I think it's a positive direction for St. Tammany," which should "continue to grow and continue to entice new businesses to come to our area," Sharpe-Brackett said.

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Controlled growth pleases River Parishes

Two surpass pre-Katrina count

By Matt Scallan

River Parishes bureau

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St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes both showed respectable growth in the 2010 census, and parish leaders are happy with the steady increase.

St. Charles' population grew to 52,780, a 9.8 percent jump over the 2000 numbers. St. John grew by 6.7 percent during the 10-year period to 45,924.

"I don't think we have that much room for rapid growth," St. Charles Parish Council Chairman Dennis Nuss said. "Steady growth is what we expected."

St. Charles Parish President V.J. St. Pierre Jr., appropriately, was attending a "smart growth" conference in North Carolina on Thursday. Like Nuss, St. Pierre said he is happy with the parish's steady growth.

"We want time to be able to build the infrastructure for it," he said. "Besides, a lot of the St. Charles Parish natives don't want too much growth. They like the two-lane roads and the oak trees."

St. John Parish Council Chairman Ronnie Smith said he thinks the parish attracted residents who chose not to return to New Orleans after the storm.

"Our neighborhoods are safer," he said. "I figured that we had grown," Smith said. "I just didn't know how much."

In both parishes, population had boomed in the year after Hurricane Katrina but subsided as the core parishes recovered. In St. John, for example, a July 2007 estimate put the parish population at almost 48,000.

St. John's 2010 count was considerably lower than the July 2009 estimate of 47,086.

The official 2010 count for St. Charles was slightly higher than the July 2009 estimate of 51,611.

The growth in the two parishes came despite a real estate slowdown that has left many vacant lots in planned subdivisions.

Neighboring St. James Parish saw a 4 percent increase in population for a 2010 total of 22,102.