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New Orleans Wants Ex-Residents Counted

Census Bureau Says Mayor's Plan to Boost Numbers Is Illegal

By COREY DADE

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin is calling on former residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to claim their old city addresses in next year's census, drawing criticism for trying to circumvent rules for winning federal funds.

The mayor -- encouraged that New Orleans has thrown off its post-Katrina malaise to become the U.S.'s fastest-growing big city by percentage -- wants the U.S. Census Bureau to grant an exception for its former residents, currently living elsewhere, who want to rebuild homes in New Orleans.

There's one problem: The mayor's plan is illegal, according to the Census Bureau. Federal law requires the Census Bureau to count all U.S. residents where they reside as of April 1, 2010, when the nationwide tally will begin.

"Any individual who does something like that is going to hurt the place where they are living, and hurt New Orleans," said Katherine Smith, a Census Bureau spokeswoman.

The stakes for localities are high. The census, which occurs every 10 years, is used to determine the disbursement of more than \$300 billion in federal grants, as well as the reapportionment of congressional and state legislative seats for the next decade. Both procedures are based primarily on population size, with the largest jurisdictions traditionally receiving the most dollars and elected representatives.

Officials in other Louisiana cities criticized Mr. Nagin for threatening their efforts to secure funds for legitimate population gains, some of which resulted from Katrina victims fleeing New Orleans and surrounding parishes. One parish is Lafayette, located west of New Orleans, where the parish seat -- the city of Lafayette -- is the state's only city to show a net population gain since 2000.

Joey Durel, president of Lafayette Parish and city, said if New Orleans doesn't have a fair count, it could potentially keep representation it should lose. "Lafayette could be losing an opportunity to gain more clout," he added.

New Orleans officials deny trying to inflate the city's population. They say they want to be prepared for the repopulation currently under way, and that the pace of rebuilding has picked up.

"What we're really talking about is people who are really close to coming back," said James Ross, a New Orleans spokesman. Mr. Ross said people who relocate will need certain services "whose funding is determined by census numbers."

Ms. Smith said the Census Bureau won't change the rules, but encouraged residents who want to be counted in New Orleans to relocate by April 1.

"We've had our challenges" with Mr. Nagin, Ms. Smith said. "But we're trying to be available for anything he wants to discuss. But our hands are tied as far as what he tells his constituents."

Virtually no population count of New Orleans has been reliable since Hurricane Katrina submerged 80% of the city. Most estimates show New Orleans lost roughly half of its 455,046 population after Katrina struck.

City and local demographers have tracked the population using several indicators, such as running totals on residential postal addresses, building permits and electrical usage. By 2008, New Orleans's population recovered to about 311,853, an 8.2% increase from a year earlier.

The return of residents began to taper off last year, but demographers say the worsening economy prompted another surge, since New Orleans is one of few cities humming with construction and other economic activity. Demographers estimate the current population has reached about 355,000.

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