



## Job growth key to population growth in Springfield and elsewhere

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Springfield economic development officials say they don't know why Bloomington-Normal and Champaign-Urbana grew faster and more substantially over the past decade.

Development leaders from those similarly sized central Illinois communities said their population increases probably were linked to job growth or continued stability at employers such as State Farm Insurance, Mitsubishi, Illinois State University and the University of Illinois.

"We have a very strong entrepreneurial community," said John Dimit, president and chief executive of the Champaign County Economic Development Corp.

But the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce isn't discouraged by Sangamon County's more modest showing, executive vice president Erich Bloxdorf said.

In fact, he said efforts under way to attract seven new employers could bring as many as 700 new jobs to Springfield and the rest of the county over the next few years, further boosting the local population.

The fact that seven major businesses are being wooed — he wouldn't identify them — is a testament to improvement in the economy nationwide, he said.

"People are starting to kick the tires in some areas of the United States," Bloxdorf said.

He said the chamber is working on a new economic strategy that could include development of an industrial park — a model that Dimit said has helped generate about 900 new jobs in Champaign County over the past 15 years.

Attracting new businesses and creating new jobs in Springfield's Mid-Illinois Medical District will be easier, Bloxdorf said, if the chamber and other officials are able to convince the Federal Railroad Administration to bypass the Third Street corridor for high-speed passenger trains and additional freight traffic.

The chamber favors consolidating Third Street rail traffic on 10th Street. A final decision on the issue is expected in 2012.

### Turning point

Initial data from the 2010 Census show Springfield's population has risen 4.3 percent since 2000, while Sangamon County as a whole grew 4.5 percent, compared with 5.9 percent increases for both the city and county between 1990 and 2000.

Decatur and Macon County — an area ravaged by plant closures and layoffs in heavy manufacturing — experienced its third straight decade of population declines.

Peoria and Peoria County saw slight increases in population — less than 2 percent — from 2000 to 2010.

Regardless, one Peoria official said the 2010 Census results were good news and marked a symbolic turning point for Peoria, the home of Caterpillar Inc.'s world headquarters. Peoria's population peaked in 1980, and Peorians experienced difficult economic times through much of the 1980s and part of the 1990s.

"We think Peoria is a wonderful place to live," said Ross Black, Peoria's assistant planning director.

He said the community has become more economically diverse, largely because of growth tied to the city's three major hospitals and other health-care businesses.

Overall population drops posted by Decatur and Macon County in the past 10 years obscured more-positive economic signs in the latter half of the 2000s, according to Craig Coil, president of the Economic Development Corp. of Decatur and Macon County.

Closures of a few large employers, such as the Bridgestone/Firestone plant in 2001, were devastating to the local economy, he said.

"We've really not totally recovered from it," he said. But Macon County is rebounding.

Caterpillar has added 1,400 jobs the past few years, and growth at Archer Daniels Midland and Decatur hospitals are making white-collar jobs the norm in Decatur, he said.

"I think we've kind of turned the corner," he said.

### High-tech jobs

Bloomington-Normal's combined population of 129,107 has grown by almost 19,000 people since 2000.

"We have really, really good, stable industries in Bloomington-Normal," said Ken Springer, a project and data analyst at the

Economic Development Council of the Bloomington-Normal Area.

Corporate employment at State Farm, Country Companies and Mitsubishi has increased, he said, while stable employment at Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan universities helps McLean County maintain one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state.

State Farm, which employs about 15,100 people in the county, has grown by more than 8 percent, almost 1,200 workers, since 2000, State Farm spokeswoman Missy Lundberg said.

Another growing part of McLean County's economy is health care, Springer said, noting that expansions are under way at Advocate BroMenn Medical Center and OSF St. Joseph Medical Center.

The hum of a healthy economy, which includes new tax dollars from a growing number of wind farms in McLean County, attracts people to the area in search of work, Springer said.

In Champaign County, Dimit said the University of Illinois Research Park, formed about 10 years ago, includes 90 companies that employ almost 1,300 people in high-technology jobs.

A 5,000-student increase in enrollment over the past 10 years at the U of I's main campus also contributed to the county's latest census numbers, he said. Enrollment stands at about 42,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

The 2010 Census totals allowed Champaign County to overtake Sangamon as the state's 10th-largest county. McLean held on as 13th largest, Peoria dropped from 11th to 12th, and Macon remained 19th largest.

### **Still competitive**

Sangamon County and Springfield officials hope to understand more about their population increase when more demographic information is released by the U.S. Census Bureau later this year. But it's clear that an increase in black, Hispanic and Asian residents fueled the growth, while the non-Hispanic white population shrank.

Dimit touted Champaign County's highly educated labor force as a key to that area's growth, but Bloxdorf said Champaign, McLean and Sangamon counties all boast relatively high education levels.

"We are very competitive," Bloxdorf said, adding that state government provides stability to local employment even though the number of state workers has been declining.

Growth in Springfield's health-care sector — led by Memorial Medical Center, St. John's Hospital, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine and Springfield Clinic — remains promising for future population increases, he said.

High-quality health care, along with a relatively low cost of living, lots of available land, interstate access and affordable utilities through City Water, Light and Power, also can be used to attract more employers to Springfield, he said.

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### **Sangamon County**

Unemployment rate: 7.1 percent\*

Top employers: State of Illinois, Memorial Health System, St. John's Hospital, Springfield Public Schools, University of Illinois Springfield, Springfield Clinic, Illinois National Guard, City of Springfield, SIU School of Medicine and AT&T.

### **McLean County**

Unemployment rate: 6.7 percent\*

Top employers: State Farm Insurance, Illinois State University, Country Financial, Unit 5 Schools, Advocate BroMenn Medical Center, Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing, OSF St. Joseph Medical Center, McLean County government, Afni Inc. and District 7 Schools.

### **Champaign County**

Unemployment rate: 7.5 percent\*

Top employers: University of Illinois, Carle Physicians Group, Champaign Schools Unit 4, Kraft Foods, Parkland College, Provena Covenant Medical Center, Urbana School District 116, Plastipak Packaging, Champaign County government and Hobbico.

### **Peoria County**

Unemployment rate: 9.3 percent\*

Top employers: Caterpillar Inc., Methodist Medical Center, OSF Saint Francis Medical Center, Peoria School District 150, Wal-Mart, Affina, Bradley University, Komatsu Mining Systems, Keystone Steel and Wire Co., Proctor Hospital.

### **Macon County**

Unemployment rate: 10.4 percent\*

Top employers: Archer Daniels Midland, Caterpillar Inc., Tate & Lyle/A.E. Staley, Decatur Memorial Hospital, Decatur Public Schools, AmerenIP, St. Mary's Hospital, Millikin University, Norfolk Southern Corp. and Star Tek.

\*Unemployment rate for December 2010, according to the Illinois Department of Employment Security.

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