



Media Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Core City Asset to Regional Growth

Kalamazoo, Michigan, April 4, 2011 - The City of Kalamazoo climbed a rung on the ladder of Michigan's largest cities over the last decade, despite a 3.7% decline in its population, according to recently released U.S. Census data.

Kalamazoo's 2010 population, pegged at 74,262, moved it from 14th to 13th on a list where nine of the largest Michigan cities declined in population, two gained and one remain unchanged from 2000 to 2010.

Meanwhile, George Erickcek, W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research Senior Regional Analyst credited Kalamazoo's strength as a core City as "a real key" to Kalamazoo County's ability to grow nearly 5% over the decade. The same trend occurred in three other large, Michigan counties where county populations grew despite their major cities losing headcount.

A 12.6% drop in Western Michigan University's enrollment from 2000 to 2010 also may help explain why the City of Kalamazoo's federal population count declined by 2,883. Census rules require college students to be counted in the municipality where they are actually living when the tabulation is conducted.

Western Michigan University's (WMU) enrollment was 28,657 in 2000 and peaked at 29,732 in 2002. In 2010, the University had a 25,045 student headcount. "That impact may be amplified by the fact that more WMU students are opting to live in apartment communities located outside the City, rather than traditional rentals in

Kalamazoo's residential neighborhoods," Erickcek said. "It may be possible that a lion's share of Kalamazoo's population decline could be explained by trends at Western," the economist observed.

"The City's commitment to extend water and sewer utilities beyond its boundaries, without requiring land annexation, also has contributed to the county's overall growth," Erickcek said. At the same time, "a downtown has a better chance of success in a county that is growing at 5% than in a county that's losing population," he added. "You expect a core City to lose population," Erickcek said. "A 3.7% drop for the City is not that bad. It's a moral victory. The real question is what is the City's role in this environment where the county grew 4.9%? The City does play a strong role in facilitating that growth."

Jerri Barnett-Moore, Deputy City Manager, said "Kalamazoo's Census count was stronger than officials here had expected." She said the City mounted an "aggressive campaign" last year to canvas neighborhoods and campuses, encouraging residents to complete their Census forms. "If we look at how other core cities performed, we're better off than we had expected," Barnett-Moore said. "There would have been a psychological effect of (Kalamazoo's population) dropping below 70,000 and we didn't have that."

A profile of the state's 13 largest cities helps illustrate why Michigan was the only state to lose population from 2000 to 2010. Nine of its largest cities declined in headcount, with drops ranging from 25% for the City of Detroit to a 0.6% loss in Ann Arbor. Only two of the top 13 - Sterling Heights and Dearborn - posted increases and Troy's population was unchanged.

Kalamazoo, ranked 14th in 2000, bumped Southfield from the number 13 spot in 2010. The City of Kalamazoo's 3.7% population decline occurred as Kalamazoo County's count grew by 4.9 percent to 250,331. That pattern was repeated in several areas of Michigan.

The City of Grand Rapids saw a 4.9% population loss over the decade, while Kent County's headcount grew by 4.9%. Ann Arbor lost one-tenth of a percent of its

population at a time when Washtenaw County grew a strong 6.8%. And while Lansing lost 4.1% in population, Ingham County was up 0.6%.

Erickcek believes that reflects continued moves to the suburbs in search of “greater acreage and bigger lawns.” Also, property tax rates frequently are lower in surrounding townships than in core cities.

Portage also may be experiencing some of that as the 28th ranked City grew its population to 46,292, up 3.1%. However, Kalamazoo County’s largest growth came in townships like Texas, up 34.6%, and Oshtemo, 27.65%.

“The City of Kalamazoo has helped facilitate that outlying growth by extending City utilities in agreements that benefit both sides of the boundaries,” Barnett-Moore said.

Erickcek said “the impact The Kalamazoo Promise college scholarship program may have had on population numbers hasn’t been quantified.” “You could maybe make a case that things could be much worse without The Promise,” Erickcek said. “But you also have to consider the good housing stock and the fact that some solid gains have been made in the downtown.”

According to Barnett-Moore, “Kalamazoo City government has prioritized both bricks-and-mortar and civic infrastructure.” “When the dollars are shrinking, you go back to the core functions of government,” she said. “As the economy improves, we’ll already have strong public safety, strong, well-positioned utilities and recreation facilities that have been maintained. We’ll continue to partner with the private sector to support development and a vibrant downtown.”

Erickcek said there’s a strong argument linking the strength of a metro area to the vitality of its urban core. “The signature of a metro area is its downtown. You want that signature to be bold, healthy and unique.”

Meanwhile, Kalamazoo also is positioning itself on the cusp of renewed interest in urban living and “walkable” cities. Vacancy rates are very low among existing

downtown apartments and condos and more residential development is underway there.

“If you want a walkable area where you can walk to work, access restaurants, entertainment and get a lot of services, the only place you can really do that is downtown,” Erickcek said.

Barnett-Moore said, “Kalamazoo’s ability to historically reinvent its economy - from celery to paper, automotive supplier to pharmaceuticals - and its cultural diversity have helped it thrive.”

While Kalamazoo ranks 13th statewide in total municipal population, Census figures indicate it’s 15th in its numbers of both white and Asian residents; 8th in black population and 6th in Hispanic/Latino residents.

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