

Area growth outpacing

Population explosion ahead of state, national rates

By Mike Creger

TIMES STAFF WRITER

St. Cloud-area growth is outpacing all projections, and researchers have concluded the reason is simple: This is a nice place to live.

"We knew this place grew, but we're seeing populations exceeding projections for 2010," economist Mary Edwards said.

A profile of the area, prepared by St. Cloud State University economic experts, proves that the area is "a nice place to live," Edwards said.

The 154-page profile, released today, details everything from birth and employment rates to crime and health statistics. It was

Growth

completed by the university's Minnesota Economic Development Center and Social Science Research Institute.

The biggest surprise while compiling the facts and figures from hundreds of sources was just how fast the area is growing, Edwards said.

The growth rate in Stearns and Benton counties is faster than state and national rates. The 1996 population in the area was 162,229 — just short of the 2010 projection of 165,780.

Sherburne County, with just 18,000 people in 1970, surpassed Benton in 1980 and now has more than 54,000 residents. With the Interstate 94-U.S. Highway 10 growth corridor on its southern border, Edwards said projections for

2020 — 72,000 people — are woefully shortsighted.

"Sherburne always asks me what the projections are for them, and they tell me they've already hit them," Edwards said.

The profile details just why people are coming.

The tri-county area has a low cost-of-living despite below-average household earnings.

Low wages entice companies to come in and set up shop with the lower overall production cost, Edwards said.

Income in the area is just 75 percent of the state average, posing a "challenging issue," economist Mark Partridge said. Part of the state average is skewed by higher Twin Cities numbers, he said, but the nature of job opportunities in the area may be a bigger factor.

Median household income

Best guess of disposable income adjusted for taxes, 1997

Twin Cities

\$50,903

Rochester (Olmsted Co.)

\$50,700

Sherburne County

\$49,400

Minnesota

\$43,246

Stearns County

\$38,509

St. Cloud (estimate)

\$38,325

Benton County

\$37,739

Moorhead (Clay Co.)

\$37,514

Duluth (St. Louis Co.)

\$32,817

Source: Sourcebook of County Demographics

Please see **GROWTH, 5A** ►

TIMES CHART

ces projections

A SNAPSHOT OF THE REGION

The tri-county profile found:

■ More women than men work in St. Cloud and Waite Park.

■ 78 percent of all water used in the tri-county area in 1993 was surface water, as opposed to groundwater.

■ More than 88 percent of Benton County residents work in Stearns or Benton counties.

■ More than 30,000 people got on or off a plane at the regional airport in 1997.

■ Of the 27 state hazardous material evacuations in 1996, none were in the St. Cloud area.

■ The average stay in a tri-county hospital is 5.11 days. The occupancy rate is 51 percent, about the state average. The five hospitals, all in Stearns, have a total of 466 beds.

■ Seasonal homes or lake cabins account for 4.72 percent of the total households in the three counties, a number surpassed only by the Duluth region at 11.58 percent.

■ Of the five state regions, St. Cloud has the lowest average snowfall at 47.70 inches. Annual precipitation is the lowest at 27.79 inches. The St. Cloud area has the second-highest number of days below-zero degrees with 47. Duluth has 48 and the Twin Cities get just 30 each year.

■ The Great River Regional Library has 30 branches offering 569,538 volumes for borrowing. More than 25,000 books are added each year. The Rochester public library system has just 134,735 volumes with 1,016 new books each year.

■ Sherburne, Stearns and Benton counties have a total of 38 cities.

■ Stearns County has the highest birth rate in the state, according to 1990 figures. The area population older than age 65 is second-highest in the state, just slightly behind Rochester.

■ From 1980 to 1990, the growth rate of plus-65 seniors was 78.48 percent, with the highest rate in Benton County. The state growth rate was just 14.05.

■ More than 30 percent of people in the Tri-county area are between 25 and 44.

■ More than 29 percent of the trees in Minnesota are pines. However, in Stearns, Sherburne and Benton counties, the pine population is just 5.8 percent.

Growth

The tri-county area has its largest number of workers in the manufacturing sector. Leading the group is food processing, followed by printing-publishing and fabricated metal products.

Partridge said a lower cost-of-living doesn't entirely offset lower wages, but some other factors make the area attractive.

"We are doing well in amenities, have a low crime rate and a lot of educational opportunities," he said.

The profile, the second this decade, hopefully will be updated each year, Edwards said. The profile includes Internet addresses with each chart and graph, offering current information with the click of a mouse.

Edwards, Partridge and economist Boon Siew Yeoh prepared the profile for the St. Cloud Area Economic Development Partnership and Stearns-Benton Employment and Training Council with funding from all three counties.

Highlights of the profile include:

Comparisons

The profile compares area figures to Minnesota averages and those of the other state Metropolitan Statistical Areas. That usually include the entire counties of which the cities are located: Duluth (St. Louis County), Moorhead (Clay), Minneapolis-St. Paul (seven county metro area) and Rochester (Olmstead). St. Cloud's MSA includes the populations of Stearns and Benton counties. The tri-county area includes Sherburne County statistics.

Population

■ The tri-county's population of 134,585 in 1970 has grown to more than 216,000 today. The projection for 2020 is 243,700. The St. Cloud MSA is the third-largest in the state, behind the Twin Cities and Duluth. By adding Sherburne County, the area surpasses the Duluth MSA population.

■ Of the tri-county residents, 27 percent live in the city of St. Cloud while 40 percent live in rural areas.

■ Sartell is the fastest-growing area city, with a 6.62 percent population increase each year. Households have increased by 25 percent in the city since 1970. There were 342 homes then and 1,867 in 1996.

■ Household growth in Stearns and Benton counties is 25 percent faster than the state average.

■ A high migration rate and natural rate (births vs. deaths) account for the growth.

■ The tri-county area has a higher average of people 25 and younger than the state. Stearns has the most.

■ From 1980 to 1990, the growth rate of the over-65 population was faster than the state average, but the decline of 18-to-24-year-olds was slower than the state.

■ In Stearns and Benton counties, married couples with children represent the largest household type at 34.5 percent. The state's largest household type is married couples with no children at 28.8 percent.

■ The St. Cloud area continues to be the least diverse of major Minnesota cities. Estimates put the white population at more than 97 percent in 1994, compared with 99.5 percent in 1970. In 1994, other percentages for white population include the Twin Cities with 87.3, Duluth with 95.5, Rochester with 92.8 and Moorhead with 91.8.

Agriculture

■ Less than 1 percent of area income comes from farms. More income was made in Benton County per capita than Stearns or Sherburne. Benton led state averages in agricultural income.

■ From 1978 to 1992, the state had 23.9 percent fewer farms. The tri-county area suffered only a 13.6 percent loss during that time.

■ Stearns County has 68 percent of the farms in the tri-county area. Area farms

average 200 acres compared with the state average of 342.

■ Dairy products account for 45 percent of area cash receipts and poultry accounts for 31 percent. Most crops in the area are grown as feed for the livestock.

Government

■ Stearns and Benton counties have lower taxes as a share of personal income than the state average.

■ The counties spend about 59 percent of the state average on its residents.

Labor

■ Unemployment rates in the area are consistently lower than the state average and lower than all MSAs except for Duluth.

■ 1994 figures show that 15 businesses in the tri-county area employed more than 500 people. Half of all businesses in the area employ one to four people.

Education

■ The St. Cloud MSA has the highest proportion of students in private schools of all state MSAs.

■ Education expenditures per-pupil are lower than the state average while student growth exceeds state averages.

■ Graduation rates in the St. Cloud MSA are higher than all other MSAs except for Moorhead.

■ More than 3,000 bachelor's degrees and 300 master's degrees were earned at local colleges in 1996-97.

Resources and energy

■ Crop land accounts for 77 percent of land use in the tri-county area, 6 percent more than the state average.

■ Electricity and general energy costs are lower than all other MSAs in the state

Transportation

- There are 110,000 autos in the tri-county area.
- There are fewer accidents, injuries or fatalities on the roads than the state average.
- The 400 miles of trunk highways in the area have a larger rate of classification as "relatively poor quality" under state listing than the state average.
- Statistics from 1990 show that 1,500 people in Stearns County commuted to the Twin Cities for work, double the 1980 figure.
- The area has the fewest public buses of all MSAs.

Health care

- There are fewer specialized physicians in the area per-capita than the state average, due mostly to the proximity to specialists in the Twin Cities.
- Divorce, suicide and homicide rates are lower than state averages, as are teen pregnancies, which are half of Twin Cities rate.

Crime

- St. Cloud had the lowest rate of violent crime of the state MSAs and also a

property crime rate below state averages. Narcotics arrests are also lower than state numbers. The Minnesota crime rate ranks below national averages.

- Nearly 97 percent of all felony cases lead to jail time, compared with 85 percent statewide.

- Area judges pronounce a higher share of sentences that are harsher than state guidelines.

- Of the 58,000 criminal filing in the area in 1997, 42,902 were for minor criminal offenses.

- There are 2.19 law officers per 1,000 people in the tri-county area.

Quality of life

- Lower housing and utility costs keep the area cost-of-living low, 2.6 percent below national averages.

- Foundation grants for arts and culture per 1,000 people are low in St. Cloud but ranked above Rochester.