

WEST MICHIGAN VIEWPOINT

Yesterday's Rivals May Become Tomorrow's Partners

Stories of past rivalries between core cities and their suburbs in west Michigan have almost become legendary. The most famous, perhaps, was Portage's dash to the county courthouse to thwart Kalamazoo's late night attempt to annex much of the former township's industrial tax base. While the enmity between the core cities and their suburbs may still exist, data from the 2000 Census suggest that these old grudges should be tabled, as these communities now have more in common than ever before. They are losing ground to the faster-growing neighboring rural areas which are sprouting newer, more spacious subdivisions and commercial/shopping complexes.

In short, the new suburbs of the West Michigan metro areas are growing much faster than the core cities, as well as the more established suburbs. In their wake, they are leaving the older suburbs still strong, but a little shaken. The core cities are still the weakest of all; however, the 2000 Census suggests that they may be coming out of their trough.

Population in the core cities of West Michigan¹ increased by only 1.5 percent from 1990 to 2000. Meanwhile, the area's older suburbs² witnessed a nearly 10 percent increase in population. However, the population in the remaining rural/new suburban areas of the region's urbanized counties³ jumped by 18 percent.

In terms of income and residential investment, the trends of the 1990s are even more stark. At the end of this period, more than 80 percent of all owner-occupied homes, valued at more than \$300,000 were situated in the rural/new suburban areas of the west Michigan urbanized counties. What may be surprising is that the core cities accounted for 8.0 percent of the counties' high-end housing, which was only slightly below the 10.0 percent share controlled by the older suburbs.

The new suburban areas captured 58.4 percent of the counties' total income in 2000, which was an increase from 54.0 percent in 1990. The core cities' residents brought in 22.1 percent of the counties' total income, down from 25 percent in 1990, while the share for the residents of older suburbs inched below 20 percent, dropping from 20.6 percent to 19.4 percent.

On the other end of the economic ladder, the core cities still house a disproportionate share of the counties' poor families, accounting for a significant 46.3 percent. However, this is a strong improvement from 1990 when the core cities

housed 51.9 percent of the counties' families struggling in poverty. Indeed, the percent of families living in poverty in the core cities fell by 24 percent in the 1990s. In contrast, the number of families living in poverty in the older suburbs rose by 1.8 percent, to 15 percent. Rural poverty is still present in the growing rural areas, with these areas housing 38.4 percent of the counties' total number of poor families; however, the number of rural poor families fell by 8.1 percent.

The uniqueness of core cities lies in the fact that they were built before autos reshaped our urban landscape. Downtowns have not been duplicated in suburban areas. Commercial areas within suburban areas are dominated by the parking needs of automobiles. A second point worth considering is that, although too many houses in the core cities are deteriorating, all of the core cities offer historical and unique neighborhoods which provide living environments that cannot be found anywhere else. In many core cities downtown or historical areas, condominiums are selling well and more are being built. It is important to note that downtowns still dominate the cultural and entertainment offerings available in each of the communities.

For the older suburbs, the newer suburbs are a clear threat. They offer the same environment as the older suburbs, except for newer—and in some instances better-planned—subdivisions. Increasingly, they also offer new and more trendy shopping outlets and more open space. Currently, the older suburbs maintain their hold on most shopping activity, but as retailers follow their customers, it may be only a matter of time until they move farther out as well.

As the fringes of our urbanized areas reach farther out, cities and their old adversaries may find it in their interest to work together to address common concerns. Strong economic arguments have been made that continuous uncoordinated residential growth is inefficient, yet without an effective public policy strategy it may be unstoppable. Moreover, if this growth is not stopped, the core cities may not be the bigger losers. Instead it may be the older suburban areas that will be the hardest hit, since the newer suburbs offer the same auto-dominated environment only newer.

Notes

1. Battle Creek, Benton Harbor, St. Joseph, Grand Rapids, Holland, Kalamazoo, Muskegon, and Muskegon Heights.
2. Bedford Township, Benton Charter Township, Grandville, Kalamazoo Township, Kentwood, North Muskegon, Norton Shores, Plainfield Township, Portage, Springfield City, Walker, and Wyoming.
3. The remainder of Allegan, Berrien, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa counties.