

New boom towns lure suburbanites

By CAROLINE PRICE
The line between city and suburbs has always been curiously drawn. But is there really a basic difference between the two? Why do people choose to live where they do?

In a two-part article, the Observer & Eccentric will explore these questions. Part I will look at the ever-increasing ring of suburbia-based migration. Part two will examine the average suburbanite versus the city resident to see if there really is a wide gap between their wants and needs.

Some 15 years ago, the dream of many Detroiters was to turn in the keys to their city home and move into a bright, airy new three-bedroom colonial in the suburbs. They flocked there away from bad city crime and disintegration to the new recesses of Birmingham, Livonia, Plymouth, Garden City and Southfield, where life was good and the only worry seemed to be fighting crabgrass on the lawn.

Today the flight continues, but this time suburbanites are trading in their slightly used colonials for even snarlier new homes in the metropolitan area's latest boom towns.

And whether that colony is called Troy, Farmington, Canton or West Bloomfield, it's bound to be just a few miles away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

DETROIT IS still the hardest hit by the population migration. In fact, the city's population has dropped to an estimated 1,234,180, a decline of 11.9 per cent from the 1970 official census figure of 1,414,000.

But the suburbs that grew far from Detroit dropouts are having to tighten their own belts. Birmingham, once one of the

most desirable communities in the city-to-suburb shuffle, has experienced a 4.4 per cent decline in population, according to U.S. government estimates. Plymouth experienced a similar decline, and the communities of Garden City, Livonia, Redford Township, Westland and Southfield have all seen their phenomenal growth rate start to decline.

On the other hand, communities like Canton Township, which has almost tripled its official 1970 population of 11,028, and Troy, up almost 30 per cent, are among the most frequent stops for moving vans.

They are joined by communities like Farmington, with a growth rate of almost 40 per cent since 1970. Troy, whose population has risen almost 27 per cent during a four-year period, and West Bloomfield Township, which has grown about 14 per cent, are also among the fastest growing.

Thus, many older suburbs take on a slight tinge of obsolescence. They are exchanged for the new "improved" environments offered by towns that sprang up where cows used to graze only a few years ago.

WHAT COMPELS these families to pack up every few years, leaving searching for a new and better way of life?

Michael Glusac, executive director of SEMCOG's, says that there are no problems in a community, such as crime or lack of facilities. People must have other reasons for leaving. "These motives might include wanting more space, a better quality of education and better tax rates," he says.

Glusac adds, "People tend to follow in clusters. For example, the Ford plant moved from Highland Park to Uxiah, it definitely contributed to the development of that area."

There is a tendency on the part of younger people to go to new structures. "We're a very mobile society now," he says.

As people began to be able to afford a personal vehicle, there was no longer any need to live in concentrated clusters," he says.

According to Glusac, the rising cost of transportation is not yet a big enough factor to prevent dispersal.

The current trend of getting back to nature could also have some impact on migration. "The romance of the city is not what it used to be," Glusac says.

"It could be a desire for a more tranquil life."

Francis Bennett, director of planning for Wayne County's planning commission, attributed some of the moving mainly to growing affluence. "Many people making this move are in an income class that considers it upward mobility to make the move," he said.

"They want all the padings a new house or apartment has to offer," Bennett added.

Oakland County Planning Commission's associate economist Jeff Kaczmarek agreed. "The Detroit region is well off in personal income, even if the region itself is not doing so well," he said.

"Those who are working are paid well." According to Kaczmarek, the area around Troy is considered a desirable place to live, even though homes seldom sell for less than \$55,000. "Oakland is a rich county," he said.

BOTH COUNTY planning commissions are concerned about the growth of one community at the expense of another.

"This causes inequity in terms of economic opportunity and a competitive situation between communities results," Kaczmarek said.

Bennett said, "The commission has recommended that the region would be better served if the distribution of activities like employment, recreation and business is intermingled."

"The region should contain substantial areas of open space interspersed among nodes of development," he added.

ONE COMMUNITY that has these goals in mind is Canton Township. Mike Manore, who helped develop a master plan for the township's development, says, "Our plan is the most unique one in the state."

"It attempts to save agricultural land and promote industrial development only on the east side of the township," he says.

According to Manore, although Canton's rapid growth rate is mainly due to residential housing, much industrial development is anticipated.

Bennett cautioned, "It is possible that some areas that still have open space are not going to win in the competition for industrial development." He said this is not necessarily bad. "There are some cases where industry can't be taxed enough to pay for the financial impact it has on a community."

EVEN AS the new communities face the problems of a rapidly growing population, the older suburbs must learn how to deal with a declining one. One of the biggest problems for these suburbs is shrinking school enrollments.

Ret Wood of Oakland Schools said statistics have shown that area school districts along the Woodward corridor in Oakland County are losing school population while other districts are growing.

"The closing of schools has become a traumatic situation for the central district," Wood said.

"New communities are hiring teachers on a lower pay scale, which helps alleviate financial strain," he added.

"In the older districts, teachers are hitting the top step in salary and seniority; but the schools are losing enrollment. Because the master contract doesn't permit the schools to cut out the staff at a higher level, they must cut down on the newer staff, which is already receiving lower wages."

According to Wood, neighborhoods generally resist the closing of school buildings in their locale because they perceive it as a form of erosion.

"The growing districts are going to have to find or build facilities for students that show up after labor day, while older districts must find ways to avoid closing schools," he said.

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Murphy testifies on county law

Immediate legislative action is the way to improve the state's unified county government, act, Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy recently told a Michigan House committee studying ways to update and codify state laws applying to counties.

Oakland voters adopted the unified county government form of government in August 1974. The intent of the legislation was to pull together the disparate laws of county government and create the position of an elected county executive.

Murphy said he has prepared a list of amendments to the unified county government act, Act 139, that would "correct its most serious deficiencies" and "breathe life into the original concept behind Act 139."

"The new form of government has been particularly effective in areas of fiscal responsibility and control," he continued.

He also urged legislation to remove the autonomous status of the county road commission and place road management under the board of commissioners and the county executive.

"I am confident that anyone suggesting that state and federal highway departments be set up in the same manner as the Oakland County Road Commission would be laughed out of the room," Murphy said.

"And yet, due to legislative inaction, we in Oakland County are forced to struggle along with a home and buggy road commission concept."



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