
Oldham population surges

County grows 16% over 5-year period

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When Flora Lewis was growing up in Oldham County, children played basketball in the streets. They didn't worry about cars.

"If somebody came by, you knew who he was," said Lewis, 64, who was raised in La Grange and lives there now.

Time has changed Oldham County. It takes longer to get places, and development has chewed away farmland.

And the county keeps growing.

According to new population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, 7,355 people moved to Oldham County between 2000 and 2005, making it the fourth fastest-growing county in the state, in percentage terms, behind Spencer, Boone and Scott counties.

If that doesn't sound like much, consider this: The 16 percent increase in population would fill the seats on 245 TARC buses. It's the population of the county's largest city -- La Grange -- plus about 1,000 more people.

It's more than three times the size of the University of Louisville's freshman class.

Between July 2004 and July 2005, 1,452 people moved alongside the horse farms and historic homes that are hallmarks of the county, and the population swelled to 53,533, according to census estimates. Oldham County is the state's 16th largest county; Jefferson County is the largest and Bullitt County is the 11th largest.

After the 2005 census numbers were released last month, Oldham County resident Doug Wampler posted them on the Web site of Oldham Ahead, his nonprofit group devoted to promoting smart growth.

"I think a lot of people kind of underestimate the population," he said. "It all has implications for everything from taxes to quality of life to anything else county citizens are interested in."

He said he hopes the numbers serve as a wake-up call to officials.

"Here we are as a rural suburban county that doesn't have the infrastructure in place nor the schools to handle the population," he said. "It just cries out for a hard look and really some hard planning to make it all work for the future and to preserve the rural nature of the county."

Faced with more development, Oldham officials have been trying to better manage growth. The county has new regulations involving sewage, schools and storm-water runoff to guide development.

The school-capacity regulation, for example, helps ensure that new homes aren't built unless the school system will be able to handle them.

Officials are also drafting rules regarding road capacity. The county has applied for a \$70,000 grant to help it write a transportation capital-improvement plan, which would plan major transportation projects five years in the future.

Judge-Executive Mary Ellen Kinser said the county needs to keep up with the growth in terms of personnel and equipment, especially with the road department. She said, "I think that the growth has been widespread throughout the county ... which has been a benefit" in keeping up with the infrastructure.

The growth outpaced Jefferson and Bullitt counties between 2000 and 2005, according to the estimates. While Oldham attracted 7,355 people, Jefferson added 6,223 to its population. Bullitt added 7,238 people.

Lewis looks forward to better stores and more entertainment options for young people in Oldham County.

Until then, she's dealing with the increased traffic, she said.

"They'll run over you, or every time you see a parking spot, they just cut in front of you and go on and take it."

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