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Shelby County growth comes with challenges

Schools, water service tested

By Marcus Green

magreen@courier-journal.com

For Shelby County, the good news in a recent U.S. Census Bureau report is clear: The county has added nearly 6,000 residents this decade and sprouted new homes faster than any other mid-sized or large county in the Louisville area.

The county's easy commuting distance on Interstate 64 to Louisville's eastern office parks, Lexington and Frankfort has helped its growth. But there have also been growing pains. Its public schools are crowded, and local water districts are eyeing a new pipeline meant, in part, to help quell water shortages.

The Shelby County Board of Education last week voted against a student reassignment plan, choosing instead to enforce existing policies as a way to ease crowding at one elementary school. At the same time, school officials worry that a shaky economy may make it harder to borrow money to construct new buildings.

Elsewhere, county planners are preparing the first update to goals for land use, transportation and housing since 2005, to better reflect the county's needs today.

And local water districts are pushing for the creation of a board to oversee -- and identify funding for -- the county's share of a planned \$50 million water pipeline from Louisville to Frankfort.

Meanwhile, the economic downturn has dealt a blow to the county's housing market and several manufacturing companies.

But county officials are quick to note that Shelby's growth over the past few years has been somewhat measured -- thanks to zoning laws that largely discourage dense housing developments. And they point to an economy that includes small businesses as well as industrial companies.

"We've been hurt just like everyone else has from the downturn in the economy, but I definitely think we're in a place where we've got good potential as well," said Amanda Gajdzik, president of the Shelby County Chamber of Commerce.

Surge in new homes

The Census Bureau data provides a snapshot from 2005 to 2007 of counties larger than 20,000 people, including Shelby, Bullitt, Oldham, Jefferson and five other metro area counties.

The report mirrored previous Census Bureau estimates for Bullitt, Jefferson and Oldham counties. Population growth in Bullitt and Oldham rose by 18 percent in each county, while Jefferson grew by 2

percent.

Shelby, meanwhile, averaged 39,267 residents over those three years, up 18 percent from 2000.

During that same time, nearly 22 percent of the county's 15,639 homes were built -- a higher rate than any other county in the Louisville area measured by the census and twice the national average.

UPS pilot Paul Waller was part of that trend. He moved to a subdivision near Simpsonville in 2003, choosing Shelby for its proximity to Louisville and its rural setting.

"We like the small-town environment," he said.

Job squeeze felt

But the impact of the nation's slowing economy is being seen in Shelby County, where the latest state data show that jobs in manufacturing, transportation and warehousing fell by 6 percent in the first three months of 2008, compared with the same period a year ago.

Manufacturing has been particularly hard hit, said Libby Adams, executive director of the Shelby County Industrial and Development Foundation.

She said the automotive industry's troubles have hurt suppliers such as Shelbyville's Martinrea International and Johnson Controls, which have lost hundreds of jobs.

"There's really not a lot on the local level that we can do" for those businesses, Adams said.

The economy is also having an impact on new home construction.

After issuing 463 permits for new single-family homes in 2005, Shelby has seen permits drop each year since. Through October, 117 had been issued for the year, said Ryan Libke, executive director of the Triple S Planning Commission for Shelbyville, Simpsonville and Shelby County.

That's partly because builders are pulling back on projects in an uncertain economic environment, said Kristian Ruble, a Shelbyville real estate broker.

Meanwhile, sales of Shelby County homes tracked by the Greater Louisville Association of Realtors fell during the first 10 months of this year to 328 from 445 during the same period a year ago.

And compared with last year, it's taken 20 days longer for homes in Shelby to sell this year.

Overall, a sluggish housing market "has been some reflection on the demand that we have here," Ruble said.

Water supply issues

Even so, Shelby is struggling to keep up with its growth.

For example, last year some residents in eastern Shelby County experienced water shortages from spring to fall, said Rusty Newton, the county's deputy judge-executive.

The state also received complaints of low water pressure from some eastern Shelby residents during the 2007 Memorial Day holiday, said Andrew Melnykovich, a spokesman with Kentucky's Public Service Commission.

"They had plenty of water," he said. "They couldn't move it fast enough. They did not have the pipeline capacity or pumping capacity."

A pipeline to be built by the Louisville Water Co. and water districts in Shelby and Franklin counties would provide an alternative supply in emergencies, said Tom Doyle, manager of the Shelbyville Water and Sewer Commission.

The project is in the design phase.

"The main thing is to ensure that we do have water without interruption," Newton said.

Schools see crowding

In the past five years, Shelby's six elementary and two middle schools and Shelby County High School have seen a nearly 14 percent increase in enrollment, according to school district data.

That's led to portable high school classrooms and a proposed redistricting plan that would have moved about 50 of 630 students from Simpsonville Elementary, Shelby superintendent James Neihof said.

He expects much of the congestion will be relieved with construction of a new building for middle- and high-school students set to open in 2010. The building's design is complete, and pre-construction work has started.

The district's facility plans also call for new elementary and middle schools to be built near U.S. 60 by 2015, although that depends on state funding and the ability to borrow money for construction, Neihof said.

But with a general economic malaise, Neihof said he's concerned about a difficult environment for borrowing money and the prospect of future state cuts.

"If those things continue to happen, it's going to be difficult" to keep up with student growth, he said.

Reporter Marcus Green can be reached at (502) 582-4675.

Additional Facts

Shelby county

Population

2005-07 average 39,267 18% from 2000

School enrollment (preschool-12)

2005-07 7,437 11%

Total housing units

2005-07 15,639 22%
