

IS MOTHER LODGE'S APPEAL DWINDLING?

POPULATION DROP HITS FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS, SERVICES

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June 10, 2013

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SAN ANDREAS - The population of the Mother Lode continued to shrink the past two years, according to recently released state and federal estimates.

Declines in county populations between April 1, 2010 and July 1, 2012 ranged from a 3.9 percent drop in Alpine County to a 1.8 percent population loss in Calaveras County, according to figures developed by the Demographic Research Unit of the California Department of Finance. Amador and Tuolumne counties saw declines of 2.8 and 2.5 percent respectively.

That shrinking population is a challenge for local governments and school districts. Although depressed property values and reduced retail sales hurt revenues for all government agencies, schools are particularly hard hit when enrollment falls because of state funding formulas for education.

"The significant declining enrollment of the last five years has had a dramatic impact on our district," said Mark Campbell, superintendent of Calaveras Unified School District, which serves the northern half of the county.

Campbell said the district had 3,563 students when the recession began in 2008, but now has only 3,162. That enrollment decline combined with state budget cuts prompted the district to eliminate 40 teaching positions.

Calaveras County government has gone through similar turmoil, cutting millions of dollars in spending and dozens of jobs.

In contrast, California as a whole saw population growth of 2.1 percent in the past two years, according to the Demographic Research Unit figures. San Joaquin County's population grew 2.5 percent, although some Central Valley locations, such as Stanislaus County, grew more slowly than the state as a whole.

"The recovery is not happening as fast in the Central Valley and mountain counties as it is in the Bay Area and nearby regions," said John L. Malson, a demographer for the California Department of Finance.

Malson said data supports what Mother Lode school officials are saying - that many working-age adults with school-age children are leaving the area in search of work.

But Malson said Mother Lode communities are also shrinking because they already have a high proportion of retirees. In many rural parts of California with aging populations, the death rate is outstripping the birth rate, Malson said.

The population figures do not tell the entire economic story for the region, however. Malson noted that proximity to urban areas - for example that Amador County is closer to Sacramento than is Calaveras County - is also significant.

While Calaveras County issued only 29 building permits in 2012, Amador County issued 110, according to Census figures.

Lone, a city in western Amador County, is a particularly interesting example. On first glance, State Demographic Research Unit numbers indicate Lone's population shrank 5.9 percent from 2010 to 2012.

But state and local officials say that was mostly due to changes at the large Mule Creek State Prison in Lone, which reduced its inmate population under a statewide criminal justice realignment plan that went into effect in 2011.

Lone's civilian population is growing, City Manager Ed Pattison said.

"Lone actually built nearly 80 homes," Pattison said of the previous year.

And he expects his town to keep growing, both because it is only a half-hour drive from the suburbs of Sacramento and because Mule Creek State Prison may be expanded.

"They are looking at expansion with a new Level 2 dormitory facility that will basically put in almost 1,600 new beds," Pattison said. If approved later this year, that expansion would generate 378 new jobs at the prison, Pattison said.

Meanwhile, officials in other Mother Lode agencies are looking for signs that the population decline is bottoming out.

Campbell said that in Calaveras Unified, kindergarten enrollment for the school year that starts July 29 is 52 students higher than it was the previous year. That compensates, at least partly, for students lost at higher grade levels, he said.

"The good news is that we are looking at our enrollment overall to be flat, if not a bit higher next year," Campbell said.

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