

Spreading out

By **DEBRA HAIGHT - HP Correspondent** | **Posted: Wednesday, August 28, 2013 6:00 am**

BUCHANAN - Berrien County residents are getting older and living farther apart.

And that could mean trouble.

"When you reduce the population density and have an aging population, that means people are getting farther away from the critical resources and services they need at the same time their mobility is decreasing," said John Egelhaaf, executive director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. "It has implications for transit and water and sewer services at a time when municipalities are seeing their revenue decline. ... That's not a healthy trend."

Egelhaaf last week reported on what 2010 census numbers mean for Southwest Michigan during a forum at Fernwood Botanical Garden. The League of Women Voters of Berrien and Cass Counties sponsored the event.

He said a planning commission study under way compares Southwest Michigan to other parts of the state and country on benchmarks such as population density, economic strength, personal prosperity, community well-being, lifelong learning and the role of the government.

Engelhaaf said population density numbers show that the region's urban population has declined while the rural population has increased. He said that trend is a concern when coupled with trends such as an aging population and people having less access to public transportation.

Southwest Michigan saw a decline in population as did the rest of the state, and Berrien County saw a manufacturing decline, according to the report.

Egelhaaf's fast-paced talk presented data over a broad range of topics. He showed data about the area's "brain drain" with more people with a high school or college education leaving the area than coming in. Berrien and Cass counties each had a net exodus of that population, while Van Buren County had a net gain.

Berrien County saw a drop in the "millennial" population of 25 to 34 year olds from 2000 to 2010 while Cass County saw a bit of a gain, he said. Berrien County had a growing number of single-person households while Cass County had a growing number of family households. Berrien County is more racially diverse, and the entire area isn't as healthy as other parts of the state and the country.

Egelhaaf spent a good part of the presentation talking about the area's economic vitality. Berrien County has fewer people in the labor force and more people unemployed since 1990 while Cass County is in about the same position as in 1990.

The area has suffered from the same recessionary forces as the rest of the country when it comes to things like manufacturing and housing, he said. While manufacturing is still the largest employment sector in Cass County, it is second behind the health care industry in Berrien County.

"Berrien County is relatively diverse economically as is Cass County, which is a little hotter in terms of manufacturing," he said. "Berrien County had a net loss of businesses from 1998 to 2009 while Cass had a loss but not as much of one."

He said Berrien and Cass counties are doing pretty well in terms of agricultural data, such as the amount of farm acreage and the overall value of crops, but need to do better in food processing.

"We need to try to restore the value chain for agriculture," he said. "We've lost a lot of processing. After we grow the different crops we put it in trucks to be shipped elsewhere for processing."

Engelhaaf said the planning commission isn't as interested in why the numbers are what they are as much as how the data can be used in planning.

He said the commission's full study will be released soon and be offered to local governments.