

A survey recently launched launched to find out why the population of Council Bluffs has not grown significantly for decades.

This survey — sponsored by the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce, the Iowa West Foundation and the City of Council Bluffs — was announced last Wednesday at the chamber's mid-year meeting at the Mid-America Center.

Chris LaFerla, the chamber's president and CEO, said this stagnation in growth is alarming to him and other civic leaders.

"Over the last 100 years, our population has remained relatively stagnant in comparison to the population of Omaha metro, which has grown significantly," he said. "Since 1970, Omaha metro has nearly doubled in size and our population is just about the same as it was."

Increases in population is important for growing and diversifying the tax base and reducing tax burdens on existing residents, LaFerla said. That's especially true with the rising costs of city services, he added.

"As the cost of running city services and infrastructure costs continue to grow and outpace our population growth, that tax base growth is really important," he said.

This stagnant growth and other regional concerns were verified at the meeting by statistics presented by Josie Schafer, director of the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Over the past decade, western Iowa counties experienced an overall 3.6% population decline, according to the center's statistics.

Pottawattamie County did see a 0.5% population hike, but it paled in comparison to the 11.6% growth in Douglas County and 19.2% growth in Sarpy County in Nebraska, the statistics showed.

The median age of people leaving western Iowa is 34.2, Schafer said.

"That's a bad time to lose someone for two reasons," she said. "First, they tend to be into their careers, and second, many are taking families with them. When people move to another state or another county, workforce in the number one reason."

Jobs with high wages have growth a bit in Iowa but not as fast as other states, she said.

It's not Nebraska or warm weather states like Florida or Arizona pulling young people away. It's Illinois, she said.

What's more, 56% who moved were homeowners, Schafer said.

Nearly 32% of Council Bluffs residents who are employed work at jobs in Omaha, compared to just 19% the other way around, Schafer said.

"This is a real opportunity to make housing attractive for those workers," she said.

Unemployment remains low across western Iowa, though Pottawattamie County's 3.8% rate is higher than other counties. There are also more residents of Council Bluffs who work in low-wage jobs than high-wage jobs.

Following Schafer's presentation and the survey announcement, Brenda Mainwaring, president and CEO of Iowa West, told the audience: "We can't leave here and do nothing. We are not growing, we are not adding

population, we are not adding to our tax base. We have to understand why kids are leaving."

LeFerla said the survey hopes to collect data from residents who live and work in Council Bluffs and why as well as from those who work here and live elsewhere and why.

"We need to understand all ages and demographic areas and who our population is and what they love most about the Council Bluffs community, and also what it is that we could do to improve and attract more young workers and families to Council Bluffs," LaFerla said. "That is what the intention of the survey is."

For details and to complete the Council Bluffs area survey, visit tinyurl.com/cbareasurvey.

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