

Flight from city doesn't worry Chamber official

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Recent findings of the U.S. Census Bureau are really nothing new, and the population vacuum from Hazleton area cities and boroughs to outlying townships is becoming the norm, according to one local official.

"There's a move to the suburbs," said Jim Boyle, president of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce.

"That's not unusual for communities in the Northeast. The population of the whole region is going down. The hard thing to judge, though, is if it is a total loss or just a shifting of population," he said.

Census data for the period from 1990 to 1998 reveals that cities and boroughs locally continued a downward turn in resident numbers, while townships showed a positive trend.

And, the Northeast as a whole is struggling to maintain its population. The region only gained about 2 percent from

1990 to 1998, according to the bureau, while the South and West saw increases of 12 and 14 percent, respectively.

"It sure would be nice to see the population stabilize," Boyle said. "The loss means empty houses, empty properties; the negatives that go along with it. They're what

See CENSUS, A2

Census

(Continued from A1)

can be called the secondary effects of a drop in population."

Yet, Boyle noted the consistency of commerce in the city.

"The change doesn't really affect (the chamber)," he said. "Even though the population is declining, the number of businesses in the Hazleton area is relatively stable. We've done a really good job of providing employment."

Both Boyle and Lena Kotansky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership, said the region's older population is contributing to the bleak numbers.

If more people are passing away than are being born, the result is obvious, Boyle said.

Pennsylvania is one of six states with a median age of 37 years or older. Although age was not thoroughly examined in the recent census study, data from 1993 showed that there were considerably more deaths than births in Luzerne County; 4,270 to 3,494.

"The elderly population, coupled with the fact that we may not be portraying the best image, and not attracting people in from the outside, means an overall decline," Kotansky said.

Kotansky mentioned the recent study completed by John Zogby, who recommended an incentive program that brings students back to the area.

A scholarship would be set up by the Civic Partnership to "offer some level of financial assistance" to students who go off to college or technical school, Kotansky said. In return, they would agree to come back to Hazleton to work for at least three years.

Although "it would not re-populate Hazleton," the scholarship would help, she said.

"We've had a positive reaction to it, with some contributors already lined up," she said. "We hope to offer at least one, if not several, in the fall of 2000."