

In Greater Cincinnati, suburbs still reign supreme



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(Photo: The Enquirer/Gary Landers)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Since 1990, population growth has lagged in Cincinnati and Hamilton County, while the ever-expanding suburban rings in Warren, Butler and Clermont counties mark double-digit gains
- More than half of Greater Cincinnati's jobs are at least 10 miles from the city's urban core.
- Increasing numbers of corporate transfers from foreign business investment in Warren County among factors fueling growth there.
- Residential demand for housing in Downtown Cincinnati outpacing supply.

When Murali and Lakshmi Swamy went house-hunting, their homebuyer's wish list contained a few must-haves.

It had to be of newer construction and close to shops and retail and in a good school district, one with a gifted program to challenge daughter Shreya.

The couple evaluated several possibilities in Cincinnati and its inner suburbs before deciding on the new Alverta subdivision in Mason – a residential development so hot that builders held a lottery for potential homebuyers in December.

"It wasn't even a choice for me," said Murali. "I have always lived in suburbs. I like it here. It's quieter."

The Swamys represent a continued trend of people flocking to Cincinnati's suburbs – despite recent findings showing Americans are increasingly favoring cities over the 'burbs. Since 1990, population growth has lagged in Cincinnati and Hamilton County, while the ever-expanding suburban ring of Warren, Butler and Clermont counties have marked double-digit gains, according to the U.S. Census.

Undoubtedly, Cincinnati's urban core has undergone a resurgence, marked by a rejuvenated waterfront and the revitalization of neighborhoods like Over-the-Rhine and East End. But the numbers show that growth is still shifting toward suburban areas – a trend not likely to abate, urban planners say.

"Nobody knows what's going to happen in 15 years. You can't even predict five years," said Menelaos Triantafillou, an associate professor of planning and urban design at the University of Cincinnati.

But "I don't believe (suburban growth) can be reversed," he said.

Editorial: Lose cul-de-sacs, other suburban lessons

For generations, people have left cramped cities for newly built homes in the suburbs, especially following World War II when cheap loans and widespread adoption of the automobile made it easier to live further from jobs. Then the Great Recession hit, reversing the trend.

Warren outpaces neighboring counties

KEY 1990 ● 2010 ●
Circles represent size of population

HAMILTON CO.

866,228

-7.4%

802,374



CINCINNATI

364,040

-18.4%

296,943



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

WARREN CO.

212,693

86.7%

113,909



CLERMONT CO.

197,363

31.4%

150,187



BUTLER CO.

368,130

26.3%

291,479



(Photo: The Enquirer/Randy Mazolla)

Since 2011, many U.S. cities have grown faster than their suburbs, driven by millennials who are delaying marriage, kids and homebuying and retiring baby boomers looking to downsize and simplify, said Liz Blume, executive director of the Community Building Institute at Xavier University.

But in Greater Cincinnati, the numbers buck that national trend. Here, it seems, suburbs still reign supreme.

For 20 years, Cincinnati has seen its residents go: more than 67,000, or about 18 percent, have left since 1990. And Hamilton County's growth has declined more than 7 percent, from 866,228 residents in 1990 to 802,374 residents in 2010.

Meanwhile, the surrounding suburbs continue to see robust growth. The populations of Clermont and Butler counties have grown 31 and 26 percent, respectively, from 1990 to 2010.

But nowhere is growth more visible than in Warren County, where the population has exploded 86 percent, from 113,909 residents in 1990 to 212,693 in 2010, according to census figures.

Since 2008, the once-rural county – now the third fastest-growing in the state – has led the region for new housing permits for single-family homes, condos and apartments, according to the Home Builders Association of Greater Cincinnati.

"Cincinnati hasn't had population growth because we haven't had employment growth. Population follows jobs," said Dan Dressman, the group's executive director.

"If businesses are looking for skilled workers and all the engineers are living in Mason or West Chester, where are you going to put your facility? Where your workforce is, in most cases."

A study released last year by the Brookings Institution indicated more than half of Greater Cincinnati's jobs are at least 10 miles from the city's urban core – a "job sprawl" greater than any other metropolitan area in Ohio.

Nearly 53 percent of the region's 858,000 jobs are located 10 to 35 miles from Cincinnati's business district, according to the report – from 49.5 percent in 2000 to 52.8 percent in 2010.

And situated at the center of what officials say is poised to become a booming Cincinnati-Dayton metroplex, Warren County's access to interstates 71 and 75, available acreage, skilled workforce and competitive tax structure make it an attractive place for businesses to invest, said Martin Russell, the county's economic director, who's also executive director of the Port Authority.

"In the Mason I-71 corridor, you have a lot of high-tech, innovative companies. In the Fields-Ertel area, you have a lot of back office and service industry. You go to Lebanon and you have a robust manufacturing base," he said.

"At (State Route) 63 (off I-75), you've got Park North, which is owned by Industrial Developments International," he added, referring to the planned 4.1 million square feet of logistics buildings on 300 acres. "Up the I-75 corridor, you have Middletown at OH-123, which has a significant investment with the Atrium Medical Center and is looking to highlight that with a medical campus."

"If you want to risk your capital, this is the place to risk it," he said.

Fueling the county's population gains are increasing numbers of corporate transfers from foreign business investment, Russell said.

While the county's racial composition remains largely white (90.5 percent), diversity is on the rise. Warren County has a higher percentage (5.3 percent) of foreign-born persons than its neighboring counties and the city of Cincinnati.

In Mason, the county's largest city, top-rated Mason Schools has become a magnet for Asian-Americans, with students of Asian or Pacific Islander descent making up 15 percent of the district's total enrollment of more than 11,000 students.

Part of the suburbs' allure, ironically, is in its embrace of urban design and amenities. New urbanism, while not a new model, is one that's been gaining in popularity in post-recession suburban planning.

Area developers are increasingly ditching McMansions and mega-malls for the old Main Street model: walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods oriented around a downtown retail area, schools and other amenities.

"Where you used to have just acres of housing and had to drive to the shopping center, (developers) are taking the idea of a town center and building it out in the boonies," said Triantafillou. "People say, 'Why do I have to go downtown? I have everything here.'"

"You're seeing commercial development follow the rooftops," added Keith Yearout, a CBRE real estate investment specialist in Cincinnati. "You no longer have to drive far away to get those amenities. The developers are bringing it to you."

That is not to say there doesn't exist a demand for urban living, but supply continues to outstrip demand, developers say.

"Residential growth is happening slowly because we can only do a handful of units at a time," said Yearout. "Everyone wants to buy a building in Downtown Cincinnati and convert it for residential, but it's expensive and not an easy thing to do to acquire a building and empty out existing office tenants."

Urban residential projects can be expensive to get off the ground and can take several years to build out, he said.

That delay leads those interested in renovated or newer homes to seek out suburbia, said Triantafillou.

"Even though there will be a recycling (of older homes), somehow there have to be new houses built to accommodate population growth. If you don't have land, naturally you're going to go to places where land is available," he said.

Cincinnati has tried to recapture regional population growth by offering financial incentives, city support for projects and a tax abatement program Dressman says is "unrivaled."

"There's no other community in this region and throughout the state that has such an aggressive property tax abatement program," he said.

That, and other efforts to attract residents, seem to have had some impact.

From 2010 to 2013, Cincinnati saw its population grow a modest 0.19 percent, according to data estimated by the Census. Hamilton County is also projected to have halted its population slide, with an estimated population growth of 0.26 percent.

But those gains may not be enough to counter the suburban stampede: In the same period, Warren is expected to have grown another 3 percent, trailed by Clermont and Butler counties at 1.4 percent and 0.85 percent, respectively.

As Greater Cincinnati's regional economies continue to compete for residents and jobs, there are strong incentives for the metropolitan area to work together, urban planners say.

"One of the things that makes Cincinnati an interesting place is that there are a lot of different kind of environments," said Blume.

"There are great city neighborhoods and suburban locations. It's the diversity that makes the whole place so interesting."

Suburban sprawl holds larger implications for the Greater Cincinnati region beyond a shifting housing market. Among the concerns:

Concentrated poverty: Warren County is the most affluent county in Greater Cincinnati, with a median household income of \$72,000, according to Census figures. That's more than double the median household income of Cincinnati (\$33,700). Combined with the area's job sprawl, concerns arise about an urban core where many jobs lie beyond the reach of low-income residents who lack transportation options.

Higher taxes: Besides limiting economic opportunity for low-income residents, suburban sprawl often results in more inefficient public services, says Liz Blume, executive director of the Community Building Institute at Xavier University. "One of the central challenges is that infrastructure – roads, sewers, water lines and even schools and police and fire services – everything costs more when it's spread out," she said.

Increased carbon footprints: Sprawling suburbs, with their larger homes that require more energy to heat and cool and increased reliance on cars, contribute more to greenhouse gases than their urban counterparts, said Blume. "Denser urban models are potentially more sustainable," she said. "On a regional scale, that's something that we eventually need to care about."

Warren County has led the region in new home permits since 2008. Here's some of the projects underway:

Alverta, Mason

M/I Homes recently opened up 10 homes in the second phase of development in its popular Alverta community on the site of the former Western Row Golf Course at Mason-Montgomery and Western Row roads. The community will feature 125 single-family residences on about 52 acres with prices starting in the mid-\$300,000s.

Willow Brook, Mason

After completing its 63-home first phase this spring, Ryan Homes expects to offer up to 55 new homes this fall in its Ridge of Willow Brook and Estates of Willow Brook communities off Mason-Morrow-Milgrove Road. Prices range from the \$190,000s for the Ridge of Willow Brook and the mid-\$300,000s for Estates of Willow Brook.

Mason Grand, Mason

Construction continues on the \$45 million Mason Grand rental community on Kings Mills Road/State Route 741, which features 294 upscale townhomes and garden apartments. More four-, six- and 10-unit apartment buildings will be added as the 70-acre site is built out, according to Schottenstein Real Estate Group, the project's developer.

Lakeside Cove at Hunter's Green, Deerfield Township

Gridiron Development broke ground this spring on its new Lakeside Cove at Hunter's Green development off Snider Road. The 21-unit "community within a community" in the Hunter's Green subdivision will offer lakefront condos starting in the \$290,000s.

Roberts Park, Deerfield Township

M/I Homes will break ground this fall on an \$80 million residential development on 140 acres at Butler-Warren and Princeton roads. The 189-home Roberts Park will offer lots of varying sizes starting in the mid-\$300,000s and going up to more than \$600,000. Eighty

acres of the property will be dedicated to Deerfield Township for use as a "passive" public park.

Rivercrest, Hamilton Township

M/I Homes will also break ground this fall on its new 132-acre Rivercrest community off Montgomery Road. The 200-plus home community in the Kings School District will offer scenic views of the Little Miami River and amenities including a stocked pond, 50 acres of green space and clubhouse. Home prices start in the mid-\$300,000s.

Otterbein, Turtlecreek Township

Otterbein retirement community is proposing a "new urbanism" community on 1,200 acres to be modeled after the village of Hamilton County's Mariemont. The development – to be built over about 40 years – would put about 4,500 apartments, condominiums, duplexes and single-family homes at Ohio 741 and Ohio 63.

Crooked Tree, Mason

Mason City Council last week rejected a rezoning change requested by owners of the former Crooked Tree Golf Course that would have ushered in a 230-home development ranging in price from \$310,000 to more than \$1 million. Developer Ct. Devco Inc. now has the option of battling council's decision in court or developing the 168-acre site at Mason-Montgomery and Bethany roads under current zoning, which would allow for condominiums, patio homes and office space.

Bow Tweh, Michael D. Clark and Dan Horn contributed to this story.