

# Counties, cities prepare for population growth

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As the economy continues to improve, Isanti and Chisago counties are starting to look to the future and prepare for population growth.

“We’re starting to see the trends of growth again,” said Bruce Messelt, Chisago County administrator.

Despite the recession and slow recovery, Isanti and Chisago counties are still expected to have population growth in the next 15 years. Isanti County’s population is expected to increase by 16 percent, and Chisago County is expected to increase by 15 percent.

“Those ring counties [around the Metro] are where you are seeing growth,” said Messelt.

There are many reasons why the counties that ring the Metro have seen growth and are expected to continue seeing growth.

“The biggest draw we’ve seen is affordable housing and land prices,” Messelt said. “Along with proximity to the metro area.”

## Housing starts

The city of Cambridge has between 1,500 to 2,000 lots for sale right now, said Stan Gustafson, Cambridge economic development director. Many of the lots already have infrastructure in place.

“What we’ve had recently in Parkwood is there are several builders/developers that have acquired regions and are now starting to build out there,” Gustafson said.

Prior to the recession, Cambridge peaked at 207 single family housing starts in 2004. In 2008, that number dropped to just one. Last year, Cambridge had 20 single family and 24 townhouse starts. This year, Gustafson estimates the city will have 30-40 housing starts.

North Branch is seeing similar housing numbers. Year-to-date, the city has 17 permits for new houses, right in line with last year when they had 41 permits for new homes for the year, said Bridgitte Konrad, North Branch city administrator.

From 1998 to 2003, the city was averaging 160 permits a year, with the peak at 200 permits in 2000.

## **Preparation for growth**

And as the cities start to grow, the counties are preparing for the increased need in services and infrastructure.

The Isanti County board has been meeting with the city of Cambridge on library and future growth needs, said Isanti County Administrator Kevin VanHooser.

“We know there is a need for the library,” he said. “And we have two county commissioners on the [library] task force.”

And once the county sees the growth, there is a larger tax base to draw from, allowing the county to expand government services for housing permits, gun permits, driver’s licenses, etc.

“Counties are pretty rational with using tax dollars,” said VanHooser. “It can be hard to plan ahead for government services before they are needed.”

Messelt said for Chisago County the economic development authority takes a good look at the socio-economic status of the projected demographics of the population growth.

“We really want to see more of the demographic information--is there a trend towards more seniors? Is there a youth movement?” Messelt said.

Different demographic groups require different needs.

“It’s not by accident that you are seeing an explosion in medical services coming to the county,” he said. “They see a demand here of population needs.”

Konrad said North Branch is also prepared for growth.

“We’re poised and ready to handle whatever might come our direction,” said Konrad. “We’re happy to see the economy improve and trickle into our area.

“We’ve done some comprehensive studies. We have some plans in place where we think we’ll be growing next and we’ve upgraded our utilities so we are prepared for growth.”

The city of Cambridge has done studies to see what types of housing the city needs.

“Our objective is if people are going to live here or work here, we need to have housing options available to them,” Gustafson said.

With a low 2 percent apartment vacancy level, Cambridge is looking forward to an apartment complex set to start building within a week.

Chisago County has been discussing life-cycle housing to ensure housing options for every resident in every stage of their life.

## **Business growth**

With population growth, it is important to also grow local businesses, Messelt said.

North Branch has started to see some new business inquiries, another positive sign of population growth, Konrad said.

Growth offers a new tax base, allowing the city to support additional amenities and jobs.

“When the population numbers go up, we want the housing numbers to go up, the employers to go up, and the employees to go up,” Messelt said. “We watch all those trends for our planning purposes.”

Gustafson said there is a good manufacturing base in Cambridge that has weathered the recession pretty well. Good jobs help keep residents working within the county or city, allowing the local economy to reap all the benefits.

When new businesses – retail or industrial – look at Cambridge, Gustafson shares with them the city’s labor market profile. The study expresses that East Central Minnesota offers one of the fastest growing labor forces in the state.

“We want to be a good, attractive place for people to want to work here and live here,” Messelt said.

## **Area’s appeal**

County and city officials express many reasons for the appeal to live in Isanti and Chisago counties.

The area offers a lot of the amenities of a city, but with the added appeal of rural lifestyle – all within a short commute to the Twin Cities.

“We’re outside the metro, but we have a lot of amenities,” Gustafson said. “And there is really good road access.”

The region is close to 169, I-35, St. Cloud and downtown Minneapolis.

And you can’t overlook the access to parks and outdoor recreation, officials said. There are plenty of lakes and areas to enjoy the outdoors that draw people to the region.

“People are going to move out here to get a little more space, get a little more land, get a little more quiet,” Messelt said.