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State's Sagging Population Could Be Costly



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Connecticut is now officially among states losing population with only Illinois and West Virginia losing more residents. For years, Connecticut has lagged behind most states in population growth, but at least we were growing a little bit — mostly because of increases in the Latino population. That has changed as the U.S. Census Bureau estimates Connecticut lost a net of about 2,700 residents from 2013 to 2014, bringing the population to 3,596,677 or down 0.07 percent. Population loss may become the new normal in the Land of Steady Habits.

It's a change that may appear to have benefits, but in the long term could mean economic hardship for state residents and diminished power in Congress.

Some Nutmeggers will view population loss as a welcomed change from little-to-no population growth. There may be fewer drivers clogging roads in and out of urban areas; however, more and more drivers will be in the age 65 and over lane — the really slow drivers clogging up the left lane. Some may expect property taxes to drop with a declining number of students in classrooms. Let us not forget the nature lovers who welcome a

declining population as a positive with fewer people meaning less demand for new home construction, which will mean undeveloped land will be left undisturbed as open space.

But, there is a dark side to all the good that might supposedly come from declining population. Fewer cars on the road mean less income from new car sales and car repairs and new tires that provide a livelihood for many households. The cost of K-12 education may not change much even if there are fewer children in the classroom as it costs just as much for teachers, administrators and building maintenance whether there are 15 students in a classroom or 20. Without increases in the number of houses, and the young families that fill them, the cost of local education will be borne by the existing pool of homeowners, who are increasingly fixed-income retirees. Although more green space may be preserved, the number of construction jobs will decline and with it the income to support many families that rely on well-paid skilled jobs.

There is also the potential for detrimental political-economic consequences if Connecticut does not get back to positive population growth.

In 2020, Congress will reapportion (reallocate) the members of the House of Representatives among the 50 states based on changes in population. The law restricts Congress to 435 voting members who are distributed proportionally according to population. If Congress were to reapportion today, Minnesota and Pennsylvania would each lose one representative, while North Carolina and Texas would each gain one representative, which contributes to a bluish to reddish state shift in the House of Representatives.

If Connecticut continues to lose population, it should not be a surprise if a congressional representative from our bluest-of-blue states is shifted to a red state. That would leave us with the same representation as Arkansas and Mississippi currently have. Connecticut would then have less political clout to keep defense dollars, and the jobs they fund, flowing into the state to build fighter jet engines at Pratt & Whitney, military helicopters at Sikorsky and submarines in Groton.

Economic growth and population growth are intertwined and we should be thinking about what will draw people to settle down in Connecticut as an integral part of our economic future. There are also self-serving interests for those not affected by defense spending in Connecticut. Retirees looking to sell their homes to downsize or move to warmer climes should consider who is going to buy their house as more and more future homeowners continue to leave Connecticut. Negative population growth has come to Connecticut and the consequences will be many, and not always desirable.

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