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Population growth picks up

Driver’s license surrenders gather steam in county; east side outpaces West Side

By Emily Brandler

The latest available numbers suggest that Spokane County’s population growth this year might be gaining momentum over last year’s stepped-up pace.

Through the first seven months of this year, 5,011 new residents had surrendered driver’s licenses from elsewhere as they obtained new licenses in Spokane County, up from 4,775 such license surrenders in the year-earlier period, says Glenn Crellin, director of the Washington Center for Real Estate Research, at Washington State University.

“So far, it looks like we’re on the road to another significant increase” this year, says Crellin, who adds that driver’s license statistics are one of the best ways to track migration.

Crellasn says the numbers through July this year continue a trend that began last year, when 8,551 out-of-state driver’s licenses were surrendered here, compared with 7,300 surrenders in 2003. That’s a 17.1 percent increase, although driver’s license numbers are just one way of tracking population trends. Crellin says the Washington state Department of Licensing, which keeps track of license surrenders, doesn’t track how many licenses former Spokane County residents surrender elsewhere.


Until 2003, that hadn’t happened since 1996.

In 2003, Eastern Washington had population growth of 0.96 percent, compared with Western Washington, which had 0.93 percent growth, OFM says on its Web site. In 2004, Eastern Washington continued that trend with 1.25 percent growth, compared with Western Washington’s 1.12 percent.

OFM’s 2005 population estimate for Spokane County was 436,300 as of April 1, or 0.995 percent higher than 12 months earlier. Its estimate for 2004, of 432,000, was up 0.787 percent from the 2003 number.

Behind the numbers

People who are moving to Spokane generally are looking for more affordable housing and higher quality of life, says Rich Hadley, president and CEO of the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce. Hadley says the
number of people who are contacting the chamber to find out more about visiting here or moving to Spokane has increased recently.

“Much more attention is being given to us,” he says.

Western Washington and California are the areas in which people have the strongest amount of interest in this region, Hadley says. Crellin says that of the licenses surrendered so far this year here, 1,222 were from California, 728 from Idaho, 392 from Oregon, and 290 from Montana.

Surrenders from Washington state are kept separately, and those figures aren’t available yet.

“There are the big four,” Crellin says. “The high-volume states don’t change much from year to year.”

Says Hadley, “People are primarily moving here from congested parts of the country. They’re finding they can live here and be as connected to the global marketplace as if they were in a congested area, while enjoying the natural assets this region has to offer.”

He notes that Popular Science magazine recently ranked Spokane as No. 2 in medical technology on its list of high-tech cities, and says that as this region becomes more well-known for being at the cutting edge of such key areas, it will be an increasingly popular area in which to live and work.

Additionally, Hadley says, international immigration is growing, probably because of the availability of the higher-education and health-care segments of the Spokane area’s economy.

He says that increasing numbers of faculty and students are coming from other parts of the world to attend or work at higher-education institutions here, and more foreign-born doctors are contributing to the growth in Spokane’s health-care sector.

Another trend that Hadley believes is contributing to population growth is the return of people who formerly lived here.

He says people who grew up or went to college here and then moved away are coming back. They’re already familiar with Spokane and return to either locate their businesses here or to retire here, he says.

A third factor in Spokane County’s population growth has to do with the appeal of Fairchild Air Force Base here to military personnel, Hadley says.

Fairchild is the second most-requested base in the country by service members, he says. People who have lived here during past assignments are coming back to retire, or they’re requesting to come here for their last assignment, he says.

**EWU report**

In a report published last year by Eastern Washington University, net migration accounted for the largest portion of the population increase here over the past decade.
Fred Hurand, professor and chairman of EWU’s Department of Urban Planning, Public, and Health Administration, in Cheney, says that net migration means more people are moving into an area than out of it. The other factor that contributes to an area’s population is natural increase, or the number of births compared with the number of deaths, he says.


Hurand says his research included data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, OFM, and College Station, Texas-based Texas A & M University’s Real Estate Center.

Hurand says that at the time he conducted his research, international immigration was up significantly in Spokane. More than 1,200 of the 2,786 people who moved here in 2002 were from other countries, according to his report. By contrast, fewer than 500 immigrants moved here in 1999.

The report included population growth forecasts, estimating that around 480,000 people will live in Spokane County in 2010, which would be an increase of about 65,000 people from 2000.

Hurand says that although population figures can change unexpectedly from year to year, recent estimates attest to continued growth here.

In the conclusion of Hurand’s report for EWU, he posed several population-related questions and concerns that could be addressed through further research.

For example, he suggested researching what countries immigrants have been coming from, and if they’re moving from the same regions in those countries. Such an investigation might give insight into what makes the Spokane area attractive to those immigrants, and whether or not conditions in their native countries will continue to drive them here.

Crellin says steady population growth and net migration hinges on the economy, so it is always uncertain as to whether that growth will continue.

“It all depends on the economy here,” Crellin says. “If we enter a recession, then all bets are off.”