

OUR VIEW

GROWTH A POSITIVE SIGN

If the emerging American worker and family votes with their feet, then the Mankato region is winning the election handily.

Recently released population figures from the U.S. Census show Mankato's population grew a whopping 21 percent in the last decade, compared to 3 percent the previous decade. North Mankato showed nearly 14 percent growth, a second decade of double-digit growth. St. Peter grew 15 percent.

Why it matters

The region's population growth is historic and holds great promise for things to come.

Some smaller cities in the region also experienced double-digit growth, including Eagle Lake and Madison Lake.

The good news is that the area grew despite two recessions, one after the 2001 terrorist attacks and another starting in 2008.

While some growth always occurs for reasons that are difficult to determine or by chance, the city of Mankato and the Mankato region have taken

clear steps to advance growth and create avenues for smart growth. The Mankato/North Mankato metropolitan area has worked together in a number of areas to make the region a good place to do business. Government has been reasonably responsive, and when it hasn't proactive voters have shown them the door.

Mankato and North Mankato have readied their infrastructure for growth with upgrades to major roadways — Victory Drive and Commerce Drive come to mind — and sewer and water systems. The region has operated for the most part in a cooperative instead of unhealthy competitive way in attracting businesses.

The cities have made use of state and federal grants to upgrade commercial structures. Mankato, North Mankato and St. Peter downtowns look better than they did 10 years ago, and despite the recession, commercial activity seems to be on the rise.

Gross sales in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties also nearly doubled in 10 years from \$2.62 billion to \$4.62 billion.

But we should remember the entire region must share in the success. Mankato/North Mankato cannot be an island. Dozens of small towns in the region lost population in the last 10 years. The regional center's core response should be that we are here to collaborate and help small towns remain viable and consistent with their leadership's goals.

There are already groups in place to help that happen. Greater Mankato Growth has partnered with regional cities such as Le Sueur, St. Peter, Lake Crystal and others on economic development. It's a progressive partnership that has won statewide praise.

The regional small towns have their own assets to bring to the table. They're friendly and quiet places to live and offer affordable housing and that small-town, rural feel. Residents of small towns can see cows and horses on rolling pastures as make their 10 or 20 minute commutes Mankato or North Mankato for work.

The challenges ahead may be even more difficult than the last 10 years, but the progressive mindset of the region's people and leaders should keep us headed in the right direction.

We should make sure we build on our success, understand what we're doing right and do more of it.