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# Rawlins County looks to keep young people

By Andy Heintz

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Like other counties in northwest Kansas, Rawlins County continues to lose people each year.

Chris Roemick, president of the Rawlins County Economic Development Council, said about 20 to 40 people have been leaving the county each year since 2005. Since 1960, Rawlins County's population has dropped from 5,279 to 2,425.

The county is developing strategies meant to keep young people from leaving, Roemick said. He said according to one survey, 54 percent of the county's youth would stay if they felt they had career opportunities available to them.

He said the council is trying to work with young people so they can be matched up with their occupational choice down the road. He said he thought this strategy was especially important when it comes to those who want

## Rawlins County Population

Population now – 2,373  
Population one year ago – 2,425  
Population five years ago – 2,672  
Population 10 years ago – 2,425  
Population 50 years ago – 5,279  
Trend – Dropping an average of 57 people a year.

to pursue a career in agriculture, since a lot of kids in the area grow up living on farms.

Roemick said the Rawlins County Schools had seen a decline in the number of students from 2000 to 2005 from 430 to 325. But he said the number has stayed level since, and he attributes this to people in the county encouraging kids to come back to school.

The Rawlins County towns of Atwood, Herndon and McDonald are concentrating on

# Thomas County figures then began to tail off

By Kevin Bottrell

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Thomas County had just 15 more people in 1960 than it did in 2009, and the county began the second half of the 20th century as a growth area.

The population grew throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s, reaching a peak of 8,828 in 1983.

The new Interstate Highway System championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower accounts for part of the county's growth. Construction on I-70 began in 1956. The freeway brought a lot of new people through and into the county. Colby Community College, built in 1964, also contributed to the population boom, bringing in teachers and students every year.

The official population count was 7,358 in 1960 and 8,180 in 2000, an estimated 7,554 in 2005 and 7,343 in 2009. The 2010 census could show further declines.

Interestingly, Colby School District enrollment numbers have not followed the population trend exactly. District Business Manager Jo DeYoung said that when the district was consolidated in 1967, it had 1,381 students, a peak that it hit again in 1994, a time when the county's population was declining. The district had about 960 students in 2009. Superintendent Terrel Harrison said most families that leave the district are moving away to find work, rather than transferring kids to other districts in the county.

## Thomas County Population

Population now – 7,178  
Population one year ago – 7,343  
Population five years ago – 7,554  
Population 10 years ago – 8,180  
Population 50 years ago – 7,358  
Trend – Dropping an average of 61 people a year since the peak in 1983.

Thomas County has not been insulated from the decline that has affected all of northwest Kansas. The county has lost 837 people (just over 10 percent) over the last 10 years. This makes it the slowest decline of the nine northwest counties, but the effects are still there.

Many buildings in downtown Colby stand empty. The number of building permits for new houses has dropped over the years. The last permit for a new house was in 2007, city officials say. There were two in 2006 and three each in 2005, 2004 and 2003.

However, Colby still serves as a retail center for the region. In 2009, the Kansas Department of Revenue reported the county as second in "pull factor," or how much a county gains in retail traffic from outside buyers. Thomas County is also one of the only counties in the northwest that is not considered a "frontier" area by the Census Bureau. Because its population density is higher than 6 people per square mile, Thomas is considered



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