

Decatur County's outflow seems to be slowing

By Kimberly Davis

The Oberlin Herald
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While Decatur County population numbers have dropped since the 1930s, the loss over the last year was minimal.

Peggy Gassman, who works in the county appraiser's office and helps with the county's census, said she's noticed that most years the drop has been around 100 people. From 2009 to 2010, the county's census when from 2,985 to 2,953, a loss of only 32 people.

Gassman said she's not sure why, but in the 23 years she's worked in the office it's possibly been the smallest drop she's seen. People apparently moved in to make up for the ones lost, she said.

The county does its count during personal property tax time, from January to April. People come in and report changes in their families. The county sends out letters to new people, contacts apartment owners and the senior centers to find any changes. Gassman said she hears a lot through word of mouth and then contacts those involved.

Economic group works to bring businesses, jobs to area

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Although the population in Decatur County has been on a steady decline, the residents and natives are fighting back, coming up with new ideas for jobs, businesses and ways to tap into grant opportunities.

Connie Grafel, marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., said she and the board members are constantly working and talking to people.

The corporation helped bring a new body shop, Creative Collision, to town. That filled a big hole in services here, said Grafel. The owners built a new building on U.S. 83 in the industrial park north of town.

The corporation continues to work on the airport expansion project, which will make the Oberlin airport into more of a regional draw with a jet-capable runway.

The county has a micro-loan program and a revolving loan fund for people wanting to start a business, move a business or even expand a business. Three businesses in town borrowed money through those programs and are paying it back now.

At the beginning of August, said Grafel, Jane Dowling came to see her about the idea of a "creative" economy.

Grafel said Dowling has been evaluating grants that people and organizations received from the federal and state governments. She says there is money available and she would like to get more of it here.

The idea is to buy a building or several buildings and establish an arts incubator. She had planned to have a presentation about the

Decatur County Population

Population now – 2,953
Population one year ago – 2,985
Population five years ago – 3,227
Population 10 years ago – 3,630
Population 50 years ago – 6,121
Trend – Dropping an average of 63 people a year.

She said she's not sure why the county started doing the census. Not all counties do a census, said Gassman, but it's helped to have it. In the past, she said, they have run reports to see how many senior citizens are in the county or how many school-aged kids.

The county numbers for both 2000 and 2009 were higher than those on the U.S. Census Bureau website.

Although the Census Bureau did the 10-year federal census this year, those numbers haven't yet been released.

idea last month.

Grafel added that Dowling is a native who has moved away but wants to continue to help the area.

A remodeled motel occupies the corner of U.S. 36 and U.S. 83, providing more rooms for tourists, hunters, travelers and others to stay.

An Obelin family recently purchased a vacated building and has started to fix it up with hopes of attracting a business.

Without help from people like that, she said, the town will go down the tubes.

The canopies downtown help draw the Main Street together, she said.

People who visit constantly say how great Oberlin's Main Street is. There aren't many empty buildings.

She said she's always willing to listen to people who have ideas and the corporation is always working on helping keep and improve the economy.

A new business that's interested in enhancing the quality of life for people here and attracting people to stay is Dream Makers. Kem Bryan and Shayla Williby just started the grant research and writing business on Main Street. The women are interested in helping keep Oberlin and Decatur County viable.

They have started researching grant opportunities, including ones for bowling shoes for the new bowling alley; playground equipment, bathrooms and lights at Sappa Park; and others.

Bryan said they want to get grants to help enhance the area so more people will not only travel here, but they move here. They plan to help enhance the quality of life in Decatur County, she said.

The population estimate for Decatur County for 2009 on the site is 2,855, which the county has the count at 2,985, a difference of 130 people.

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau had 3,472 people living here while the county numbers showed 3,630, a difference of 158. <don't they count some the feds don't, like students and military?>

County numbers <from which census?> show 20 years ago that there were 4,217 people, in 1980 there were 4,822 and 50 years ago in 1960 there were 6,121.

That's amazing, said Gassman; the population has dropped more than half in 50 years. In the past 50 years the population has dropped 3,168.

The decreasing population may not surprise anyone who lives in the county or in north-west Kansas. With larger farms, fewer kids, an aging population and lose of jobs, more people are moving out.

Oberlin Mayor Joe Stanley said the numbers have been declining for the last 50 to 80 years. He said he's not sure what it would take to change that. Some might think that a big business coming in and hiring a lot of people would help, but the unemployment rate is so low that a business would need to bring its own workers.

Mayor Stanley, who owns the hardware store on Main Street, said when he goes to conventions his suppliers put on, they say the way to grow the business is to just advertise

more and to more people.

Stanley said he explains to them that every year he has fewer people to advertise to, and in retail business here, they actually need to sell more stuff to the same people, not sell to more people.

By maintaining what the community offers, he said, we are inviting people in from other towns. Services aren't being let go, he said.

The town tries to keep up entertainment and recreation programs for people who do come here and those who live here.

Stanley, who went to school here, said things have changed. There were 100 students in his graduating class, he said. Nowadays, the classes are at 20 to 25 each.

Shortly after 1900, said veteran County Commissioner Ralph Unger, the population started to drop. If you look at history, things shifted when Interstate 70 was built where it is and U.S. 36 ceased to be a major route.

The railroads have declined and aren't used as much anymore, he said. Farms don't take as many people to work.

Over the years, the county has grown and exported a lot of good young talent, he added. Kids are raised and move away for college and then don't return.

The answer to the question of how to stop the declining numbers or turn them around, he said, is one everyone has struggled with for years. No one has found the answer.

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