

Introduction

Chapter 1F – Overview of City

(This introduction is an adaptation of the Demographic Study conducted by the Grier Partnership and appears in a more comprehensive format in V.2, Chapter 6)

With its economy once anchored by some of America's manufacturing giants, Syracuse – like most other cities along the Northeast corridor – has seen its industrial base erode in recent decades. During that period, its population began to decrease and its infrastructure continued to age without sufficient replacement. The economic decline was felt also in the City's public schools where declining enrollments and an aging infrastructure became commonplace as the decades wore on.

Far from accepting that further decline was inevitable, the City and its citizens are working to turn the tide. New industries (*technology, education, health care*) have moved in, others have moved in new directions, and the pace of population decline has slowed. The state legislature set up an appointed body of both City and Syracuse City School District (SCSD) officials and community members called the Joint Schools Construction Board (JSCB) to act as fiduciary overseer for a multi-phase school reconstruction program. This Master Plan focuses on Phase 1 of that program, which has breathed new hope into a school system that has been in physical decline for decades.

Syracuse and Its Population

Syracuse is the fifth largest city in New York State, behind New York City, Buffalo, Rochester and Yonkers. But like many other cities in the northeastern United States, it has been losing residents in recent decades. By Census Bureau figures, its peak population was reached in 1950 at 220,583. As of 2007, the latest year for which the Census Bureau has released an estimate at this writing, the Bureau has estimated 139,079. There has been a steady and

consistent decline since the last census in 2000, when the population was reported to have been 146,224.

That means that since 2000 alone, the decrease was 7,145 or 4.9%. However, this was a smaller loss than between 1990 and 2000, when the city's population had dropped from 163,860 to 146,224 -- by 17,636 persons or a bit less than 11%. The overall decline in Syracuse since the recorded peak in 1950 to 2007 has been 81,504 or 36.9%.

The average annual loss has slowed to 1,021 per year since 2000, versus 1,264 during the 1990s. Still, Syracuse was ranked by the Census Bureau as the 23rd fastest-losing city in the nation from 2005 to 2006 in terms of population. In this respect, though, it was behind both Buffalo (7th fastest), and Rochester (20th fastest).

But the worst may be over. The recent loss has been at an average rate of three-quarters of 1% per year, versus a bit over 1% per year during the 1990s. The Resource Center of the Greater Syracuse Economic Growth Council now projects the population in 2012 to be 142,279. That would be an increase of 1,621 persons, or 270 per year over the six years from 2006. This seems quite reasonable in light of the fact that population decline has slowed significantly and new development is underway.

The city's recent population decline has been due in part to a loss in jobs. With the closure of the Carrier plant and the declining workforce of GE, the dominant industrial pattern has changed from heavy manufacturing to largely services. Small businesses, with work forces of 25 or less, have made up part of the difference and are generally more stable. Many of the new businesses are technology-oriented, with an emphasis on computers and digital systems. High-quality woodworking is another of the local specialties.

The major institutions located in the city, both educational and medical, are growing and continue to provide well-paying and stable jobs. Banking and commerce are also concentrated in the city. However, many of the employees of these firms commute in from the suburbs. And institutions located in the suburbs are unlikely to draw many of their workers from the city. Recently, heavy construction at Syracuse University and the major hospitals in the area has been a source of both jobs and revenues.

The city has welcomed people from other nations, and is a participant in a federally sponsored program to resettle newcomers from Asia, Bosnia and Somalia.

The population of Syracuse today is quite diverse racially and ethnically, and is becoming still more so. In 2007 it was estimated by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey at 64.2% White, 28.9% Black or African-American, and 6.9% other races. As of 2000 it had been 67.1% White, 27.6% Black and 5.4% other races. About 5.8% of the population is now Hispanic, up somewhat from 5.3% in 2000. Hispanics may be of any race, and are included in the racial percentages given above. The total population of Onondaga County is much less diverse. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimated that in 2007 Whites made up 86.1% of the County's population. Blacks or African-Americans were 11.2% and other races 2.7%. About 2.9% were Hispanic.

Onondaga County, like Syracuse, has been losing population. In 2007 the Census Bureau estimated its total population at 454,010 – down by 4,326 or 0.9% since 2000. That compares to a larger loss of 8,227 or 5.6% for Syracuse.

Various minority groups have tended to locate in specific portions of the city. For example, Hispanics have become concentrated in the near western quadrant. This area is described as both the most diverse and the poorest part of the city. In 2006, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey reported that 41% Latino children in Syracuse were in poverty.

Syracuse Schools

The SCSD is a dependent district to the City of Syracuse. While day-to-day management of the district remains independent of the city administration and the Board of Education is elected at-large, the city provides funding and approves the school district's annual budget.

Student enrollment has trended downward over the past eight years, with an unexpected spike in enrollment for both the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years. Enrollment hovers around 20,000 students. On average, 21 percent of students are identified for special education services (*See Master Plan Chapter 4A.4*), while a growing percentage are English Language Learners. The district is becoming more diverse with each passing year, with both white and African American student enrollment on the decline. The district has 38 learning sites, some of which are niche programs to serve a particular educational need.

The schools have struggled to maintain and increase achievement levels with an ever-burgeoning immigrant population and pockets of extreme poverty significantly impacting some schools. Over the years, a number of Syracuse schools have been designated as Schools Under Registration Review (SURR), with several correcting the course while one simply being closed. As of April 2009, three schools remain under registration review, including: Seymour Magnet, Delaware Elementary School and Blodgett Elementary School.

The school facilities have been in a slow and steady decline over the past 40 years along with the city's fortunes. While some buildings date back to the turn of the century, others were designed based on teaching practices that have since become outdated by today's standards. The two newest renovations completed in 2002 at Dr. King and McKinley-Brighton are bright spots among the facilities.

The seven original JSCB schools were as follows:

1. Bellevue Middle School Academy at Shea (Grades 6-8)
2. Blodgett PreK-8 School
3. Clary Middle School (grades 6-8)
4. Fowler High School
5. Institute of Technology @ Syracuse Central
6. H.W. Smith PreK-8 School
7. Dr. Weeks PreK-5 Elementary School

Under the Option 7, adopted December 4, 2008, by the JSCB, (*See V.2, Chap.7c*) the following work is slated for the seven schools:

- 1) **Bellevue Middle School Academy:** New roof and repairs.
- 2) **Blodgett:** Program study to assess future viability.
- 3) **Clary Middle School:** New roof and repairs.
- 4) **Fowler:** Complete renovation and addition.
- 5) **Institute of Technology @ Syracuse Central:** \$24 million renovation/addition of the 1959 building.
- 6) **H.W. Smith:** Renovation and addition.
- 7) **Dr. Weeks:** Complete renovation and addition.

The Syracuse Economy

Poverty in Syracuse has been on the increase. The Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey estimated that among all families in the city with related children under 18, 37.7% had incomes below the poverty level. This was exactly the same percentage as in 2006. The 2000 Census reports that the percentage of such families in poverty at that time was 31.1%.

There has also been continuing high unemployment. In 2000 the unemployment rate for Syracuse residents age 16 and older in the civilian labor force, was 9.3%. In both 2006 and 2007 the Census Bureau has reported that it was almost unchanged at 9.2%. The unemployment rate for young African-American males 20 to 24 years old was much higher – 31.2%. Moreover, this figure was based on the number who were in the labor force – i.e., either working or looking for work. Of all Black males in this age group, only 69% were even in the labor force.

Syracuse is not alone among cities in New York State in having economic problems. In May 2007, a Brookings Institution report on the condition of America's aging industrial cities compared Syracuse to 11 other cities in New York State, based on data from the 2000 Census. Its unemployment rate of 9.3% was a bit lower than the 9.8% average of the other cities, but higher than five of them. However, its loss in employment from 1990 to 2000, 2.1%, was lower than in all but two of the others, Albany and Utica. But only two cities, Buffalo and Utica, had median household incomes smaller than Syracuse's \$25,000. Its per capita income of \$15,168 was third lowest of the 12, and its poverty rate, 27.3%, was the highest of any of them.

There are positive signs for the city, however. In fact, the city may have started on its way to a level of economic recovery. One underlying source of strength for the city's economy is the fact that three of the most important economic activities serving the entire area – education, health care, and banking and commerce – are concentrated in the city. One Syracuse bank has about 1,000 employees. Hospitals serving the whole area are located in the city, as are major colleges and universities. While many of their employees now commute in from the suburbs, as gas prices continue high – as they almost certainly will – more may well find living in the city increasingly attractive.

Syracuse Housing and Neighborhoods

The city's housing stock has been aging, and few new units have been built in recent years. As of the 2000 Census, 85.5% of the units were more than 30 years old, and 74.6% were older than 40. Only 2.4% had been built since 1990. The Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey found that only 820 more units, 1% of the total, had been added since 2000. However, the figures also show that 355 of these units, 43% of the total, had been completed in the past year alone. Thus the pace of homebuilding has been accelerating. Moreover, these homes do not include older housing units in revitalization areas that had been restored to essentially new condition – of which more will be said later.

In all, the American Community Survey found a total of 54,152 households residing in Syracuse in 2007. Of these households, 25,324 or 47% contained families, of which 12,967 or 51% were married-couple families. The rest had a single householder, and 74% of these were women. Family households were outnumbered by those without families, of which there were 28,828 – and among these 22,935 contained only a single person living alone.

Vacancies have been running quite high in Syracuse, especially in rental housing. The Census Bureau reported that in 2007, of a total of 66,693 housing units in the city, 12,541 or 18.8% were vacant – close to one in five. Transience was quite high as well, with 38.4% of householders having moved into their homes since 2005. In all, 26.8% of occupant households reported having no vehicles available – 39.6% of renter units, and 8.4% of owners. Among renters, 17.1% had no phone available; among homeowners, the same was true for 3.4%.

In 2000 a Neighborhood Initiative Housing Market Study, prepared for the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative by the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, found that the city's housing market was in decline, particularly in the inner-city areas. The study concluded that “while economic factors, particularly the prolonged recession with resulting out-migration to

other parts of the country were important, they were not enough to explain the observed trends in neighborhood decline.” They identified four major challenges that they said must be addressed.