

Lehigh Valley cities ready to boom



People walk, shop, and eat along Main Street in downtown Bethlehem during the lunch hour on Tuesday afternoon on May 7, 2013. (APRIL BARTHOLOMEW, THE MORNING CALL)

By **Matt Assad, Of The Morning Call**

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As New Yorkers and Jerseyites in search of more house and a bigger yard migrated to the Lehigh Valley's exploding suburbs, the region's struggling cities of Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton experienced nearly four decades of population flat-lining.

But lately something has changed to make Lehigh Valley planners detect, well, an urban pulse.

For the first time in decades, middle-income people seeking affordable housing are looking in the cities. And young professionals are looking to urban communities where they can walk to shop, play and maybe even work.

As a result, the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission predicts that by 2040 more than 40,000 more people will be living in the Valley's three cities.

arly 140,000, Bethlehem will bulge to almost say.

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For Bethlehem and Easton, it would represent the first significant gains in more than 40 years. For Allentown, it would be an extension of the surprising 2010 U.S. Census; most demographers had been predicting the city's decline.

Planning Commission Executive Director Michael Kaiser cautioned that the new numbers are just projections — an educated guess based on the trends as he and his staff sees them. But he also pointed out he isn't making the forecasts lightly.

It's the first time in decades that the Planning Commission has projected such optimism for the Valley's urban core.

"We think people are coming back to the cities," said Kaiser, who has directed the Valley's planning commission since 1967. "That's not to say growth in the suburbs is over, but people are rediscovering the benefits of living in a walkable community. It's quite a change from the past 30 or 40 years."

It's certainly a departure from what the commission has been projecting in its annual forecast. Just two years ago, it predicted virtually no growth in any of the Valley cities through 2030. But then, the 2010 U.S. Census numbers revealed that Allentown had grown by nearly 11 percent, adding 11,400 people since 2000.

Bethlehem's 5 percent increase to 74,982 and Easton's increase of just a few hundred to 26,800 were certainly smaller, but it all prompted commission experts to begin looking at the future in a different light. When they did, and combined it with emerging national trends, the new numbers were startling, Kaiser said.

Those new forecasts say that by 2040, Allentown will add more than 21,000 people, Bethlehem will grow by 14,500 and Easton will be home to more than 7,000 additional residents.

There are plenty of national indicators to back those predictions, said Christopher Leinberger, visiting fellow for the Metropolitan Policy Program of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. A Brookings study last year determined that for the first time since the 1920s, the 51 largest cities in the nation are growing faster than their suburbs.

Cities like Austin, Texas, Tampa, Fla., Denver and Atlanta each grew more than 3 percent in 2011 alone, and Washington, D.C., is adding 1,500 new residents per month, Leinberger said.

The reasons for the return to the cities are many, and largely speculative, admits Leinberger, a planner and developer who has studied urban development for more than two decades. There appears to be a theme: After three decades of building giant homes in the suburbs, a new population of "knowledge class" people are looking for the more affordable or more convenient housing in the city.

They're young professionals — software developers, financial experts, data engineers and computer work, shops and their favorite restaurants. And ome, lived in them for decades and are now

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In short, two major groups that make up half the population — baby boomers and their children — are now looking for the same kind of walkable communities.

"We haven't had a major change in demand like this since they started building suburbs 60 years ago," Leinberger said. "This isn't going to go away soon. It's going to take them 25 or 30 years to catch up with this change."

In the case of this region, Lehigh Valley cities can also expect a continued stream of people from New York and New Jersey willing to accept a longer commute in exchange for more affordable housing.

Valley mayors who have watched their towns struggle through decades of decline are counting on it. Bethlehem Mayor John Callahan said hundreds of new luxury apartments are being marketed to those two growing groups.

"Our population is getting younger and smarter," Callahan said. "Those are two wonderful trends to have going for a city."

In Allentown, the growth is even more imminent, with developers snapping up downtown property to build what figures to be hundreds of upscale apartments near a new hockey arena complex.

"It's not a myth, it's already happening right here, right now," Easton Mayor Sal Panto Jr. said. "We've opened more than 100 new downtown apartments in the last 18 months and another 100 will be open soon. Young people are coming back."

People like Jim Henkel. He was driving an hour from his home in Chester, N.J., to his job at EPS Financial in downtown Easton, when in 2011 he decided to move into a newly built apartment downtown. For rent that is less than the real estate taxes he was paying on his New Jersey home, he's two minutes from work and in the middle of a burgeoning restaurant district he's certain is about to explode.

"I feel like I have an extra two hours of my day back," Henkel said. "Plus, I get to be part of this cool renaissance that this town is going through. I love it."

And so do plenty of his colleagues. Since Henkel moved two years ago, EPS has grown and 10 of the company's 25-member staff now live downtown.

Valleywide, the planners expect 227,000 people by 2040, an increase of 35 percent. And the burbs that boomed before the recession are expected to continue: Upper Saucon Township will nearly double its population, and Upper Macungie Township will grow 80 percent.

Most of that was expected; the revival of the cities is what's surprising about the forecast.

Of course "we're not fortune-tellers," Kaiser said. "We could be wrong. Wouldn't be the first time."

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Database editor *Eugene Tauber* contributed to this story.

Cities Rising

Experts are predicting big population growth in Lehigh Valley cities. Here's a look at the top four projected increases, by population, in each county.

Lehigh County/2010/2020/2030/2040

Allentown/118,032/122,666/130,338/139,617

Upper Macungie/20,063/24,992/30,232/36,235

Upper Saucon/14,808/18,880/23,568/28,672

North Whitehall/15,703/19,903/24,049/26,324

Northampton County

Bethlehem/74,982/77,810/83,189/89,545

Bethlehem Township/23,730/26,116/29,323/32,917

Forks Township/14,721/16,709/19,308/22,186

Easton/26,800/28,295/30,801/33,858

Source: Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

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