

THE CITY OF CHAMPIONS GROWS BY LEAPS, BOUNDS

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By **BOB OKON** Staff writer

JOLIET -- Joliet remains among the fastest-growing cities in the United States, and local officials expect it to keep expanding.

The city is one of only a few outside of the southern and western states to be listed among the fastest-growing in the nation in a U.S. Census report being released today.

Joliet, with a July 2006 estimated population of 142,702, also was the fastest-growing city in Illinois in terms of sheer numbers for 2005-06 and for the period since 2000. The city added more than 6,500 people in one year and nearly 36,500 people since 2000.

The phenomenon is explained in part by the Chicago region's population trends, said analysts. But they and city officials also point to a strong infrastructure in place to handle new residents moving into the area.

"The population has gone up, but people are still getting the same services they have in the past," said Joliet Mayor Arthur Schultz.

The census report on municipalities being released today is based on July 2006 population estimates.

Joliet ranked as the fifth-largest city in Illinois behind Chicago (2.8 million), Aurora (170,617), Rockford (155,138) and Naperville (142,901).

Among U.S. cities with populations of 100,000 or more, Joliet was the only one outside of the South and West to be ranked among the 15 fastest-growing. Joliet ranked 12th for growth between 2005 and 2006 and 13th for 2000 to 2006.

Outside of the South and West, only Olathe, Kan., joined Joliet among the 25 fastest-growing cities for the period since 2000. No other Midwestern city was in the top 25 for 2005-06.

Joliet's ranking is explained in part by its history as a city that stood apart from the Chicago regional economy, said Kermit Wies, deputy executive director for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

"Joliet had an economic base that was healthy and stood on its own," Wies said.

Even though conditions deteriorated in the industrial recession of the 1980s, the city remained in a position to grow when the area rebounded, Wies said.

"During the time that Joliet was healthy, a good deal of public infrastructure was put in place," he said. "It's really poised to take advantage of the growth that's occurring in the region."

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning forecasts that the entire region will add nearly 2 million people by 2030.

While Joliet was the only city in the top 25, three other Illinois cities were among the fastest-growing 100 for 2005-06: Elgin (28), Aurora (86) and Rockford (100).

The three fastest-growing cities nationwide for 2005-06 are North Las Vegas, which is outside of Las Vegas; McKinney, which is near Dallas; and Port St. Lucie, Fla., located on the east coast of Florida.

The fastest-growing urban areas now are located outside of major cities, said Kenneth Johnson, a demographer and sociology professor at Loyola University in Chicago.

"This is happening in every big metropolitan area in the United States," Johnson said. "This is essentially sprawl going on. Joliet has been swept into that area where sprawl is occurring."

Much of Joliet's growth also is coming from its expansion of borders farther west into Kendall County. That's where most of the population growth is occurring, said city Planning Director Don Fisher.

Fisher also expects Joliet will continue to add population.

"The trends have been very favorable to the city of Joliet for the last 10 to 15 years," he said. "We see those trends continuing."

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