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Region climbs population ladder

Metro area could eventually pass Buffalo, Rochester, but it depends how it's counted

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The Rochester and Buffalo areas better look over their shoulders, because the Capital Region is sneaking up from behind.

If this decade's population trends continue, in fact, the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area could become upstate's largest in four decades, according to new census data released this week.

The changeover could even arrive much more quickly if commuting patterns change -- adding more counties to the U.S. Census Bureau's measurement of the Capital Region -- or if new GlobalFoundries-related growth brings a sudden population spurt, as some predict.

Being upstate's biggest metropolitan area would give the Capital Region bragging rights and, perhaps, greater political clout.

But would it matter otherwise?

"Only to the extent that economic growth is positive, so it would indicate that the region is healthy," said Rocco Ferraro, executive director of the Capital District Regional Planning Commission, which monitors demographic trends.

The shift might matter a whole lot more to Buffalo, which has grown used to being New York's second-largest region but has suffered from long-standing economic and population declines.

The Rochester area, which has also lost population over the past decade but at a much slower pace, now trails the Buffalo area by fewer than 100,000 residents.

"For Buffalo to find itself smaller than Rochester or Syracuse or Albany would be a psychological blow," said Kathryn Foster, director of the University at Buffalo Regional Institute.

But as Foster noted, regional rankings, as measured by the census, can be somewhat arbitrary. They also include far more than the city at the center of a metro area.

For instance, the census doesn't include the significant population on the Canadian side of the border in Buffalo's statistics. Likewise, the Buffalo area only includes two

counties, while the Rochester area and the Capital Region (Albany, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Schenectady and Schoharie) each include five.

Foster and Ferraro noted that the census tries to determine cultural and economic ties -- including commuting patterns -- when deciding which counties to include. In fact, Greene and Montgomery counties were once considered part of the Albany-Schenectady-Troy area, but are no longer included.

"It's confusing," Foster said. "To the degree that these metropolitan areas keep changing, they create artificial leaps or declines."

Indeed, if the Capital Region were to gain Greene and Columbia counties, it would add about 100,000 residents -- putting the area on its way to the top spot.

But Ferraro isn't optimistic the region will be number one soon.

He noted that much of the Capital Region's population rests with an aging Baby Boom generation. That means, he said, that a growing percent of the population will either die or move to Florida, stalling population growth.

Also, population declines in Buffalo and Rochester seem to be slowing or ending, leading to hope that those areas will rebound.

Plus, there's an upstart metro area that might have the Capital Region in its sights: Poughkeepsie-Newburgh-Middletown.

That area -- which may or may not be upstate, depending on one's point of view -- has seen its population increase by nearly 9 percent since 2000.

With 678,000 residents, the Poughkeepsie region is now larger than the Syracuse area. And it lags the Capital Region by fewer than 200,000 people.

What will this growth mean for our region? Comment on the [Read and React](#) blog.

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Sneaking up

The Capital Region might be poised to become upstate's largest metropolitan area, in part because of population losses in the Buffalo and Rochester areas. Here are the estimated changes over the last nine years:

2009 Change since National

Area Population 2000 rank

Buffalo 1,123,804 -- 46,305 50

Rochester 1,035,566 -- 2,270 51

Capital Region 857,592 + 31,713 58

Poughkeepsie- 677,094 + 55,570 77

NewburghSyracuse 646,084 -- 4,072 81

Source: U.S. Census Bureau