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Census could affect Boone legislative districts

BY MARK HANSEL • MHANSEL@NKY.COM • JANUARY 23, 2010

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BOONE COUNTY - In 2000, Boone County had the highest census response rate in Northern Kentucky, and with much at stake, plans are under way to ensure strong participation again this year.

The 74 percent response rate in the county in 2000 easily surpassed both the state and national averages of 66 and 67 percent, respectively.

"We've been meeting since September and reviewing what we did 10 years ago and looking at how the environment has changed," said Boone County Planning Commission Executive Director Kevin Costello. "I'm not sure people realize how much it helps us at the local level and we can only benefit from people participating, filling out the form and making sure it gets back."

Census figures do a lot more, Costello says, than just provide an accurate population count. They are also used to help determine federal and state funding levels, plan government services and draw legislative districts.

In Boone County, which has experienced rapid growth and expects a population increase of about 39 percent since the last census in 2000, the numbers have added significance.

Voting districts in Kentucky include just over 40,000 people and while districts can straddle more than one county, they must be reviewed every 10 years and re-divided if necessary. The census data is used to make this determination.

Consequently, Boone County, which had just over 85,000 people in the 2000 count, has two districts completely located within the county. A third district includes Campbell, Kenton and a small portion of Boone County.

With population in Boone County projected at about 120,000 after this count, subsequent redistricting should also amount to additional state representation.

In the private sector, the figures can help determine which communities are targeted for housing developments, retailers and health-care providers.

Costello spearheaded the Boone County effort 10 years ago and is the chairman of the Complete Count Committee again.

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"The whole complete count committee is relatively new in the census process," Costello said. "They did it 10 years ago and they want to also have it as part of this census."

The committee consists of community and government leaders dedicated to building awareness of the census. In Boone County the committee consists of the mayors of Union, Walton and Florence, the Boone County judge-executive, a group of five citizens and Costello.

"The thought process is that even though the census is the duty and responsibility of the federal government, the local governments really know the community much better," Costello said.

Costello said the committee has some additional challenges this time around but also has experience and improved technology on its side.

Widespread use of the Internet now allows information to be disseminated through a network that can include everything from city and county Web sites to church and school newsletters. There will also only be one form used for this census, the short form, which has just 10 questions.

On the other hand, the rapid growth and ethnic diversity the county has experienced could present new obstacles to an accurate count.

The county's increasing minority population, for example, includes an expanding Hispanic community, which historically responds to the Census at a lower rate. Specific outreach efforts targeted to community hubs, such as Cristo Rey Parish in Erlanger, are planned, to provide information and improve participation among such groups.

Costello said the committee will also work with social service agencies to help identify and notify other underreporting groups, such as low-income residents and isolated senior citizens.

The county is also participating in the Local Update of Census Addresses program to ensure the Census Bureau accurately identifies and notifies all of the addresses in the county, especially those that did not exist 10 years ago.

Other outreach efforts include reminders in utility bills, contact with business owners to encourage compliance in the workplace and the use of digital and manual sign boards at area schools.

"We're still putting together an overall strategy and plan to hit that hard in March," Costello said.

National Census Day is April 1 and residents should begin to see the Census forms in mid-March.

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